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MARRIAGE À-LA-MODE;

A

Romance in the Life of a Yorkshire Squire.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

BY

Incog.

Squier, come ner, if it youre wille be,
And say somewhat of love for certes ye
Connen theron as moche as any man.
Nay, sire, quod he, but swiche thing as I can
With hertly wille, for I wol not rebelle
Again youre lust, a tale wol I telle,
Have me excused if I speke amiss;
My wille is good; and lo my tale is this—

CHAUCER.

VOL. II.



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MARRIAGE À-LA-MODE.

PART I.

(CONTINUED.)

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE snow has come again and Lily stands at the cottage window with her baby in her arms. It is a tiny snowdrop of a child, with its mother's eyes. Lily, looking as childishly happy as the infant, lifts it up, and the child catching a glimpse of the white glittering world outside, laughs and crows with delight, then turns and hides its face in its mother's

neck, mixing its flaxen ringlets with her black tresses, a tiny waxen infant nestling up to the delicate pink and white of its mother's face—the poor loving mother who did not know that it was her own.

Lily sat in the window watching for Mrs. Brooke, who had gone into Brixton, and must be now on her way home. A neighbour, was sitting placidly beside the fire knitting. Mrs. Brooke never left Lily alone in the house now.

Presently a black speck appeared in the white distance.

“That must be Granny, baby,” cried Lily.

But no, as it approached nearer she saw that it was a man. He was very much muffled up, she could not see his face; but there was something in his figure and gait that was familiar to her, *unpleasantly* familiar, though why she could not tell. He came nearer, she

could see him distinctly now, all except his face. His left hand was ungloved and hanging down, and on one of the fingers was a quaint old-fashioned ring. Where had she seen that ring before? She pressed her child close to her beating heart and tried to think. A hand with a ring like that on it had once struck her. She remembered how the stone had glittered as he raised his hand, and then she remembered another time when she had returned the blow and hit him on the mouth—the mouth that had cursed her mother—and he hated Alan, this man. He had tried to part them once, and with a childish lack of reason she instantly determined that it must be his doing that Alan did not return to her more quickly—Alan, who loved her so! Had this bad man hidden him somewhere?

For a moment the Squire paused in front

of the cottage to knock the snow off his boots, and as he stooped to do so his hat fell off, and Lily, crouching behind her muslin blind, saw again the man she hated so. She was the gentle girl-mother no longer, but a wild beast longing to spring upon her prey. It was strange he did not feel the fascination of her eyes as she glared upon him, but he was busy with far different thoughts, and quickly passed on. Lily did not look after him; she shut her eyes for a moment and shuddered, then laying her little child in its cot ran out of the house.

* * * * *

Mr. Gascoigne went slowly on. He was on his way from Paris to Heatherby, summoned by a telegram. His wife was ill, seriously ill. She had been confined of a

dead child (her second, both born dead), and the news had reached Mr. Gascoigne as he was on the point of sitting down to a pretty little supper at his hotel. Gascoigne tore open the telegram hurriedly, read it, and heaved a sigh of relief.

"I was afraid it was about the horse," he exclaimed, "but I find it's only my wife."

"*Only* your wife, you wretch," screeched Mdlle. Héloïse and her mamma simultaneously, and Mademoiselle picking up the paper that Gascoigne had thrown down, read, "Mrs. Gascoigne gave birth to a dead child at three o'clock this morning. She is dangerously ill. Please return."

Mademoiselle was but sixteen, and her woman's heart was not yet turned to stone.

"Of course you will go at once?" said she quickly.

"Of course I shall do nothing of the kind," replied Gascoigne.

"I don't like your English women," said Héloïse. "All last summer I danced in London, and they are so *triste*. What is she like, this wife of yours? Old and dull, and ugly? I think wives generally are. Oh! I will never be a wife!" and Héloïse laughed lightly.

Near Héloïse's chair sat a young Englishman who had known Mrs. Gascoigne in her unmarried days—only three years before!

"Old and dull, and ugly!" cried he indignantly, remembering the bright light-hearted girl of former days.

"Gascoigne, do you really mean that you are not going to her at once? What if she were to die?"

Next day another telegram came urging

his immediate return, and for decency's sake he was obliged to comply ; solacing himself, however, by going out of the way to visit a horse of his that was in training near Brixton, and it was when returning home from this expedition that he passed Lily's cottage. He walked slowly, wrapped in tedious speculations of many kinds, his eyes upon the ground. The soft snow lay thick upon the path, and he did not hear the sound of footsteps following him. Suddenly he felt his right arm tightly grasped. Instinctively he raised his other to strike, but, turning round, his eyes met Lily's, and with a cry of terror he dragged himself free, and endeavoured to run away, but slipped on the ice and fell. Before he could rise she was upon him. The strong man, trembling with supernatural terrors, was powerless in the

grasp of the slight girl. Lily bent her head till he felt the hot breath upon his cheek.

"Where have you hidden Alan?" she asked in a hissing whisper.

In vain Gascoigne tried to speak; fear tied his tongue, he could not articulate.

"You are mocking me," she cried fiercely. "Speak! I know it is you who prevent Alan coming to me. Where is he? Tell me—speak!"

The wretched man would have given worlds to do so—worlds to tear his eyes from her fascinating gaze. She paralysed him.

Slowly she raised her hand. In another moment it would descend upon him! The strong man's heart stood still anticipating, with horror, the blow that little hand would give—when lo! with a wailing cry, she suddenly started to her feet and fled from

him. Swiftly and silently she went over the snow and entered the cottage, and staggering towards her child, fell down insensible before it.

In the delirium that followed she raved incessantly of that scene in the snow, and of a cold white hand that grasped hers and led her away from her enemy.





CHAPTER XIX.

It was May Day, a perfect May day, crowned with sunshine and flowers; but Lily and Evangeline were not playing among them. Lily had never recovered the effect of her encounter with Mr. Gascoigne. When the excitement passed off she was thoroughly prostrate and begged for nothing except to be left alone. It took all little Evangeline's kisses and Mrs. Brooke's power of persuasion to induce her to leave her bed in the morning; and it would often happen that Mrs. Brooke, missing her at noon, found that she had crept away quietly to her white bed in the sunny upper room, and when she

sought to rouse her she would say she was tired, and sink off again into a childlike slumber. Even Evangeline failed to excite her. For about an hour in the early morning, and another hour at sunset, she would be really awake, and would talk in her dreamy way to Granny or Evangeline, or those unseen companions. Although she had ceased to play with Evangeline, still she was never happy to wake from her slumber and not find the little child beside her.

Generally Mrs. Brooke, when she saw Lily stirring, lifted the baby on the bed and set her where the poor little mother's eyes would, as they opened, look upon her.

It was so on that May Day evening. When Lily woke the beautiful little child was sitting close to her on the bed. Lily smiled and reached her thin white hand to the little one ;

but Mrs. Brooke, as she looked anxiously into the sick girl's face, was startled. There was a change. The placid, unquestioning look that made her face so childlike was gone; in its place was an expression of puzzled surprise and a shadow of sorrow.

"Who is this, Granny?" said Lily, pointing to the child.

"That, my darling? That is our precious little child, Evangeline. You remember Evangeline?"

Lily shook her head.

"When is Alan coming back? Is there no letter for me?"

"Not to-day, Lily."

"I am very tired," said Lily, sadly. "I should like to go to sleep. If Alan comes when I am asleep, tell him I loved him always."

For a moment she closed her eyes ; then opening them, and lifting her head from her pillow, she gazed at Evangeline with a radiant look of love that was half divine.

“ Kiss me, little child,” she whispered.

The laughing baby bent and kissed her, and, even as she kissed her, the mother died.





CHAPTER XX.

HOLME PRIORY, you will remember, was a long house, with wings standing due east and west.

The chapel was in the western wing, and had two entrances, one for the servants, on the ground floor; another for their masters and mistresses, by steps down from the corridor, from which also a door opened into a little curtained gallery, made by order of Alan's grandfather, when he became too infirm to descend the staircase.

How well Alan remembered the old soldier sitting erect in his wheeled chair, overlooking the little congregation, loudly leading the

responses, drowning the feeble trebles in the hymn-singing, and echoing the chaplain's part in a stentorian whisper.

Alan had kept his word as regarded the restoration of the chapel, and he had, furthermore, disposed of Simpkins, and in his stead put in the younger brother of one of his old college friends, a quiet, studious lad, who kept in his own sunny study out of Alan's way, and read morning and evening prayers to the servants in the beautiful little "oratory."

Alan, this May Day evening, was pacing up and down the corridor. Several things had happened to annoy him that day. His steward was leaving; he had had a telegram from abroad that a horse which he had backed very heavily had lost; and there were other things.

He sauntered to a window, and leaned against it with folded arms. On the window ledge was a little vase full of primroses. A picture rose before Alan's eyes of a beautiful girl sitting on a mossy bank, and himself kneeling before her wreathing clusters of primroses among her black curls. It was May Day, and he had crowned her his queen, and he recollected with a start that this, too, was the first of May.

"Just three years ago to-day," he muttered. Alas! what years they had been to him!

There were hours still when he yearned for a sight of her. Ever since he had broken from her there had been times when he had only been able to restrain himself from going to her and throwing himself at her feet by the fear that she would scorn him.

He turned away from the window, and, in turning, caught the flower glass and upset it.

“Poor little flowers !” said he, with a sentimental sigh, and, honouring them for the sake of past days, he stooped and gathered them up. But the water was spilt, and he was in too lazy a mood to get more ; yet he arranged the flowers tastefully in the glass, and left them there—to die !

But the associations connected with the primroses, and that sweet spring-time when those other flowers had blossomed, roused again the passion that had slept but never died.

The yearning for Lily came back so strongly as to be an absolute misery. Scarcely knowing what he did, he opened the door that led to the little chapel gallery, went in, and pushed aside the curtain.

Coming in out of the gloomy corridor, the

chapel seemed one blaze of splendour. The sunset light was streaming in through the richly-coloured west window, glistening upon the marble pavements and flecking with rose and gold and purple the white altar drapery, and lighting up the jewels in the gold cross upon it until they shone and quivered like jets of flame.

At first the sudden transition from gloom to brightness dazzled him; but as his eyes became accustomed to the glow, he started to find that he was not alone. Upon the white marble pavement, almost below him, a female figure was kneeling. Her head was bowed, and her clasped hands were raised above it. Her long black hair mantled her. He could not see her face. Instinctively, Alan sank on his knees.

Who, or what could it be? Was it but the creation of his fancy? He shut his eyes

for a minute, and endeavoured to steady his thoughts, but opened them to see again the same rigid figure still kneeling amid the fading sunset light. He was unable to repress a shudder, and then—why he could not tell—the cry burst from him involuntarily—

“Lily ! Lily !”

The being raised its head and turned towards him, and for one moment he saw again the sweet sad smile of the girl he loved. Her eyes were closed, as though in sleep ; her white lips moved ; was she answering his call ?

Alas ! no whisper reached him. Just for a moment her face was turned towards his ; then, slowly fading, melting, as it were, into a sunbeam, she was gone !

* * * * *

A week has passed. Alan is once more at

the hotel at Brixton, just come down by the night train.

During the days that have elapsed since that May Day evening he has been in a painful state of uncertainty. At one moment he would resolve to go at once to Lily; at the next he would tell himself that his journey would be fruitless—Lily, in her pride, would scorn him; but day and night the thought haunted him, until at last he resolved that he would go and know the worst.

By some strange fatality, they put him into the very same room which he occupied three years before. How familiar everything is to him. The same faded carpet, crimson curtains, and dreary splendour of mahogany furniture and staring mirrors.

He is glad that no one recognises him; and it would have been somewhat difficult to

know this melancholy man, with the silky, auburn beard, to be the same person as the bright-faced, clean-shaven lad of three years before.

Alan purposely came *incognito*. Supposing he finds Lily married? In that case, he must quietly go home again, and no one will know anything about his having been there. He feels terribly anxious and nervous. He never knew until now how much he loved her.

During those past years he had persistently repelled the thought of her; but now, when he had permitted himself to come and seek for her—resolved to offer her the only reparation in his power, and make her his wife—the floodgates of his heart were broken down, and he himself was astonished at the depths of his love.

The more he allowed himself to dwell on the thought of her, the more he became troubled with fears lest his journey might, after all, prove fruitless; that he might never find her at all, or find her married to another.

Oppressed by these thoughts, he became so excited and restless that, late though it was, he determined to go out. The cool night air would refresh him, and perhaps they might meet!

Alan walked with a quick pace through the familiar streets, and paused at the door of a concert-room to scan the faces of the crowd that poured from it. Lily had sometimes gone to concerts at that room with him—but no, she was not there!

At length he returned to the hotel, determined to go to the cottage first thing after

breakfast. Almost anything, he thought, would be better than this suspense.

At ten o'clock he started; not by the sands, he could not bear that, but by the high road along the top of the cliff. Soon a turn in the road revealed the cottage, nestling in the hollow.

How bright and pleasant it looked in the morning light. Yes; there, standing before the door was Mrs. Brooke—only Mrs. Brooke. She was looking up the road in the other direction, and did not see Alan till, trembling, he stood before her.

He could not speak at first. At length, in answer to her silent, scrutinising gaze, he faltered—

“Don't you know me, Mrs. Brooke?”

“Yes; I know you,” she said at length, speaking with an effort.

“I—I have come back to ask Lily’s forgiveness. Will she see me do you think? May I go to her?”

For a moment the old woman’s face quivered with emotion; but she struggled with herself and repressed it, and, pointing with her hand along the road, she said, in a hard, bitter tone—

“You want my Lily? Go up yon hill and stop at the first gate you come to. Lily’s *there*.”

Little dreaming of the meaning of her words, Alan went on till he came to the gate she had indicated—it was that of the churchyard.

It was an ominous place for a re-union; but Lily had always been fond of wandering there. He leaned against the gate and eagerly gazed round, but could see no one.

Perhaps she had gone to the other side, behind the church.

He went in and walked stealthily about ; he thought he would surprise her. He peered anxiously round the church corners ; but no ! the place was empty.

Before leaving, he turned round and gazed once more. Yes ; there was some one there. On a sunny, new-made grave 'sat a little child, weaving daisy-chains. She was a very little child, and Alan wondered to see her there all alone. Perhaps, after all, Lily might not be far off ; she might have brought the child and left it there for awhile and would soon return to fetch it ; Lily was always fond of little children.

Alan made his way through the long grass to where the child was sitting. Evangeline was very busy with her chain-making, bend-

ing her little golden head until the curls mixed with the flowers. When she heard Alan's step she looked quietly up at him, smiled serenely, and then went on with her work.

"All alone, little one?" asked Alan.

The child shook her head, and laid her hand caressingly on the newly-turfed grave upon which she was sitting.

"Ella safe. Mammie *here*," said the child.

Too much absorbed in his own cares to reach the meaning of her words, Alan again retraced his steps to the gate, where he was met by Mrs. Brooke.

"Well! have you found her?" she asked harshly.

"I have been all over; she is not here at all."

“Come with me,” said the woman ; and, grasping his arm with her bony fingers, she led him back to where Evangeline sat.

In what bitter way she had planned to tell him of Lily’s death I cannot say ; for, just as she opened her lips Evangeline looked up and smiled upon them.

“God forgive us,” cried Mrs. Brooke, bursting into tears ; and kneeling down by the child, she covered it with kisses, while Alan, with a dull notion of the truth dawning upon him, stood by in silence. As soon as Mrs. Brooke could control herself she continued—“Cannot you guess, sir, what it is I have to tell you ? Well, you shall hear it all soon ; but come and kiss your child ; it is just that you should see her first on her mother’s grave.”

That night Alan, with his little child lying in his arms, heard the history of Lily's illness and death, and received her dying message—

“If Alan comes when I am asleep, tell him I loved him always.”

END OF PART 1.



PART II.

CHAPTER I.

AMONG the Devonshire hills there nestles a quiet little village called Exridge. It was a very quiet little village indeed at the period of which I write. Alan had once passed through it while on a pedestrian excursion into Cornwall, and been much struck both with the extreme beauty of the situation and its apparent isolation, and when he began to look about for some quiet place where he might send Mrs. Brooke and Evangeline, and which he might safely visit without fear of detection, his thoughts flew to Exridge.

It was a day's journey from Heatherby and a day and a half from Holme, and as neither he nor Mrs. Brooke had any acquaintances, either in Devonshire or its neighbourhood, they decided upon it at once, should they, that is, be able to meet with a cottage there.

Alan went over to make enquiries. He wanted, he said, a small cottage for an old retainer of the family and her adopted child. The village innkeeper knew of no house that was then empty, but remembered that the schoolmaster, whose wife was just dead, had expressed a wish that some one would take his house off his hands, as, being a lone man now, he would prefer going into lodgings. The school stood on the edge of the village green, and if the gentleman went to it he would find the master, who would show him the house with pleasure.

It was about four o'clock in the afternoon, and as Alan crossed the green the school doors flew open, and the children with merry shouts rushed out to play. Then as they saw the stranger, a rare sight in Exridge, suddenly stood still, staring mutely, and their astonishment was not lessened as they saw him approach the open door. The master, a little white haired old man, was busy locking desks, and tidying pens and papers, seeing Alan pausing in the doorway, came forward and waved him to enter.

"Business with me, sir?" said the little man, with an air of gracious condescension.

"I understand you are thinking of letting your house. I am looking out for a cottage for a friend."

"Ah! (inflected) a little rural retirement at Exridge? Could not find a more charm-

ing spot. I speak from experience. I have lived here for sixty years. Led the singing for forty ; been schoolmaster for twenty-five ; clerk fifteen. This way, sir—" and he opened a little door at the back of the school-house, and, crossing the road, led the way down a narrow grassy lane, thick with wild roses and honeysuckle, and pleasantly shaded by trees.

"We have not far to go. It is just at the end of this lane ; you will soon see the chimnies," said the old man, and then he sighed, and was silent and led the way along the narrow path with bended head.

Presently, above the high edges, Alan saw the cottage roof, and soon they were at the garden gate. Alan was surprised and delighted. This was far beyond his expectation. The little garden, screened by high hedges,

was full of carefully tended flowers planted in numerous little quaintly devised beds, set in the trim grass plots. Over the white walls of the cottage crept roses and ivy. If the interior were as charming there would be no need to seek further.

The old man showed him each room, almost in silence. The kitchen, three bedrooms, little parlour, all so trim and orderly. They entered the parlour last, and the schoolmaster brought forward a chair for his visitor. Alan expressed his approbation of all he had seen, but said he could make no final arrangements until the person he required it for had seen it also.

“A friend of your own, I think you said, sir.”

“Well, yes. She is a person in your own rank of life, an elderly woman. She has no

family of her own, but has an adopted child, the daughter of a friend of hers who died. And the rent! What do you think of asking?"

"I wish to sell it," said the old man abruptly.

"Sell it! Well, perhaps it would not matter. What would be the price?"

"£600," said the old man, in a low voice.

Alan uttered an ejaculation, but perceiving that the schoolmaster seemed nervous and distressed, he checked himself, and rising sauntered to the window and looked out. It was a pretty spot, no doubt, but then, not on the railway, and so far from London.

"You would not think the price too high, sir, if you had lived in it for thirty years as I have done," said the old man, sadly.

"You are attached to it, of course. I

almost wonder you like to leave it," said Alan, thoughtlessly.

"It is no question of liking. I want the money," said he in a low tone, and then added quickly, "but you won't mention this in the village, sir?"

"I should much prefer," said Alan, "that no one should know anything of our arrangements except ourselves."

The old man's face brightened somewhat at this, and after a pause, he asked when the gentleman's friend would come over to see the cottage.

"I hope, sir, she is a careful person," said he, glancing at the shining oak furniture and spotless curtains. "I hope she is. I don't know what my old woman would say at the thought of her things going into a stranger's hands. But it cannot be helped. Sally would

have done it herself had she been here. Aye," and his voice sank into a husky whisper, "to the uttermost farthing."

"She could scarcely be more particular than Mrs. Brooke," said Alan kindly.

"And she will do the work herself and not keep a servant? My wife never liked those servant girls."

"No more I think does Mrs. Brooke."

"I can go any time, and the sooner the money comes the better."

"And you have found some lodgings, then?"

The schoolmaster screwed up his mouth and shook his head—

"None that will suit me, but until I do meet with some I can live in the school-house. Did you notice some furniture in the garret? That is what I mean to take away with me."

It is of no value except to myself. There was a shut-up bedstead and some common kitchen things, you remember. We were only poor folks when we married, my wife and I, and got those to begin housekeeping with. They were soon replaced by better things, but we never liked to part with them."

"Mrs. Brooke will not require three bedrooms. Why not remain here and lodge with her?"

"You are very kind, sir, very kind! but no! no! When I leave this house it will be for good." And then the old man rose and with many apologies asked if he might be allowed to offer his visitor some refreshment.

"I am a temperance man, but if you take coffee I can make you an excellent cup. Perhaps you would like a stroll in the garden," and as the old man bustled off into his neat

kitchen Alan threw open the low window of the parlour and stepped out into the garden.

It surrounded three sides of the cottage and in one corner was a little arbour. What a delightful place this would be for Evangeline; and as Alan paced to and fro, he imagined to himself the little feet tripping along by his side, and the little hand nestling in his own.

A month had passed since he knew that he was a father. What a month it had been to him! First of all was the bitter sorrow and humiliation, and then, springing up as a flower out of a bed of thistles, came a great sweet love for his little child, and all the wealth of his soul that had hitherto been so crushed down and pushed aside by his selfishness and indolence came forward to greet Evangeline. She was doubly dependent upon him, and the very word dependent was a

new one to him. He who had all his life been petted and waited upon had now this little blossom of a child to guard and care for. The object of this tedious journey into Devonshire had been to find some retreat where he could come and visit his child without fear of notice or criticism.

Mrs. Brooke, as you know, was to pass as an old servant, and Evangeline as her adopted child. Alan intended to come occasionally and be her lodger for the sake of the fishing. As to what their relations were to be to each other in future—Alan never gave that a thought. It was not his fashion to trouble about the future.

But there was one thing that Alan had done with a promptitude very unusual to him; he had invested enough money in Mrs. Brooke's name to bring her in £300 per annum, and

had had a will made for her, leaving the money to Evangeline in case of her death. Should Evangeline, however, die first, the money was to go, after Mrs. Brooke's death, to the Foundling Hospital. In Mrs. Brooke's will Alan was named the sole trustee, to be succeeded on his death by such as he should in his own will appoint for that purpose. These arrangements were Alan's first acts of retributive justice.

"Coffee is ready, sir," said the school-master, coming to him in the garden. "You are admiring my flowers? All my own rearing," added he, with a sigh, and stooping over the bed he pointed out those most worthy of admiration, handling the sweet buds tenderly and raising them upwards for inspection.

Alan, although no botanist, admired the

beautiful as well in flowers as in everything else, and praised them so warmly that the old man looked pleased.

“But, indeed, you must not forsake your garden,” cried Alan. “Let me get some man to work under your direction.”

But the schoolmaster shook his head, and they entered the cottage. While they were taking coffee the old man discoursed about the village and the neighbourhood, and from that to the church. Would the gentleman like to see it? Alan, who could not possibly leave Exridge that night, it was then six, and Darton, the nearest station, was some few miles distant, gladly agreed, for he had been wondering in what way the evening was to be passed. As they entered the churchyard a four-year-old girl ran up to them, and then, seeing the schoolmaster’s companion

was a stranger, retreated coyly, a finger on her lip, the other hand behind her.

“Come, come, Rosie, what is it, honey?” said the old man, holding out his hand.

Rosie sidled up to him eyeing Alan jealously the while, and then, bringing forward the hidden hand displayed a fine moss-rose, saying—

“Please, mother sent it, Mr. Falconer.”

“Tell your mother I am much obliged to her. It is a real beauty—much obliged,” and taking the child by the hand he entered the church. It was unlocked.

“The master and me don’t hold by locked-up churches, sir,” said he as they went in.

“And are you not afraid of thieves?” said Alan.

“Thieves! Why, there is nothing they could well carry away. It would take a

strong man to take the font, or the big Bible either, for that matter. No! no! God Almighty can protect His own property. Seldom is it that it is not open from eight to eight. Many is the tired traveller who has eaten his bit of meat and bread, and had a good rest in this porch. It is quite the custom, and look here, sir," and he opened a good sized box that was on the stone bench within the porch, and showed Alan a large Bible within it. "The master put that there three years ago, and it has been well read."

The Bible in question was, in truth, very dirty, but to the old schoolmaster's eye the black finger marks and dog-eared leaves were but so many triumphant proofs that the book had been well used. The furniture of the church was very simple, but scrupulously clean, and the old man wandered from one

part to another pointing out its beauties lovingly. The Norman font, the Gothic arch, the peculiar clerestory, the modern stained glass (very hideous) all were commented upon, and his little store of antiquarian knowledge modestly displayed. As they came out again into the churchyard Mr. Falconer led the way across the grass to a distant grave, or was it not rather a dainty flower-bed?

“You see, sir, I have another garden,” said he quickly, and giving the moss rose to the child he guided the little hand with his own and laid it upon the grave.

There was no headstone to mark the grave, but Alan had no doubt it was the clerk's wife. At the churchyard gate they parted, and Alan, after wandering a little about the village, found his way to the inn. There

was no difficulty in securing a bed for the night, visitors were both scarce and welcome.

The landlady, bustling and good-natured, brought in his supper, and enquired if he had made any arrangements with the school-master. Alan replied that nothing would be settled until Mrs. Brooke, for whom he was engaging the house, had seen it herself.

"Ah, poor old Falconer," said she. "It is sad for him after all his years of hard work to have to turn out at last. Did he mention his son, sir?"

"He spoke of no one except his wife."

"Ay, to be sure, that is his way. Well, I will tell you his story; you will think none the worse of him," and as she bustled to and fro with plates and dishes she told him that there was one, Dick Falconer, the apple of the old man's eye, an only child, who, from

being a gay youth, had grown to be a reckless man, and had, at length, committed some deed—what, she did not exactly know—but it was so bad that he had been obliged to fly the country. The villagers had not been sorry for this, thinking that the old man was well rid of him ; but no sooner had it become known that Dick had fled than debts began to be spoken of on every side. The old man was, of course, not responsible, but he could not bear to think of the misery his son had caused. They do say it would take £500 to cover the debts,” said she solemnly.

“£600,” thought Alan ; “then here was the old man’s secret.” After all it was but an old story. The sacred home sacrificed for the child for whom the home had been first founded, the well-beloved prodigal son. The landlady, finding that she had a good listener,

chattered on, and told many kindly stories of the old clerk and his wife. *He* was a bit above them all; and everyone, except the vicar and the little children, were afraid of him. But Mrs. Falconer! "Ah, sir, you should have seen her," and the tender-hearted landlady paused to dry her eyes. "Was anyone sick, or in trouble, or anything like that, there she was sure to be. Talk of Sisters of Mercy! they are nothing beside Sarah Falconer."

When the landlady finally disappeared with the supper tray it occurred to Alan to go down into the lane again and smoke his cigar there. He was intending to start very early in the morning, and wished to have one more look at the cottage, which was probably to be Evangeline's home. It had looked peaceful in the daylight, but it was doubly

so now in the quiet evening. The moths were flitting about, and here and there a glow-worm sparkled. How fragrant were the roses and honeysuckle! There was no sound but the "calling the cattle home" along the fields, and the quiet responsive lowing; but as Alan came nearer the cottage he heard a voice—surely it was that of the old clerk's—chanting softly—

Oh, God our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast
And our eternal home.

Yes! it was Master Falconer watering his flowers. Alan leant against the gate, but did not speak. The old man seemed so happy, surely it were a pity to remind him of realities. And yet, mused Alan, the realities may be the flowers, and the hymn,

and the spendthrift son the dream. The flowers, argued he, though not eternal in themselves, are yet parts of an eternal system, the buds of earth culminating in the *immortelles* of heaven; and our hymns—feeble though they be—are echoes faint and far of the eternal anthems. The little religion that Alan possessed was of a sentimental poetic type. In the humiliation of the last few weeks he had become more of a Christian (to use a cant term) than he had ever been before in his life. And there was hope for him in the future as long as he followed where Evangeline led. What man could desire a better guardian angel for his soul than the pure love of a little child? Alan, his mind overflowing with fancies, religious and poetical, slowly retraced his steps, and presently he heard the singing

following him in the distance with the constantly recurring refrain—

Our eternal home.

“Was he solacing himself by that thought,” wondered Alan, “for the cottage home that he was to leave so soon?”

The singer paused at the churchyard gate, and entered there.

“Going to tend his other garden,” thought Alan.





CHAPTER II.

ALAN is again standing at the garden gate. He has ridden over from Darton to pay his first visit to Evangeline in her new home. She is sitting in just the same attitude as when he first saw her, her lap filled with flowers, with which her little rose-like fingers are busy, and above which droops the pretty golden head.

Alan, leaning on the gate, whistles softly, and instantly the little head is raised, and Evangeline, uttering a cry of delight, springs to her feet and runs to him, scattering flowers all the way. Then she nestles silently in his

arms, her happiness complete. Alan carries her into the arbour, and there the two sit and talk.

At last Alan talks, and Evangeline sustains her part by nods and smiles, or questioning glances.

Master Falconer had never entered the house since Mrs. Brooke's arrival, and the innkeeper, in whose charge Alan had left his horse, reported that the old man looked very unhappy; so on that first evening father and child started hand-in-hand to visit him. He was in the schoolhouse.

Alan set the child on the step, her arms filled with flowers from the cottage garden, and then, knocking at the door, walked rapidly away, telling Evangeline he was coming back presently.

Looking back when half across the green,

he saw the old man open the door and speak to the child, and the tiny child, with a graceful gesture, offer him her flowers. Then Master Falconer took her in his arms, flowers, and all, and carried her in.

In a few minutes Alan returned. As he approached the door he heard the old man prattling to the child, and the baby's shy response. Entering, he found that Evangeline was enthroned upon Master Falconer's knee, placidly happy, arranging her flowers.

"Very glad to see you, sir, very glad; and who is this?" said the old man.

"Don't you know your little tenant?"

"Well, I thought it must be so; but I had not seen her before. Mrs. Brooke I have seen, and very kind she is, sir, very kind. Is the little one related to her?"

“Only by adoption.”

“Ah! I remember now, you told me—and she is an orphan, poor little darling! But God is a father to the fatherless. Do you know, sir, I have often thought that orphans get on better sometimes than those who have parents. God Almighty seems to take extra care concerning them.”

“We have come with a petition,” interrupted Alan hastily. “When we bought the house we did not buy the garden, you know, Mr. Falconer. It will be ruined if you don’t come and look after it.”

“Oh, sir! don’t ask me.”

“It is only the first visit that will be painful. Imagine that you are still living there, and that we are your visitors. Now, I have a message for the good lady at the inn. May I leave Evangeline with you for a while,

and will you see her safely back to the cottage when you are tired of her ? ”

An hour later, as Alan was strolling backwards and forwards in the cottage garden, he heard voices approaching, and presently, hand-in-hand, in the gateway, stood the old man and the child.

“ Make him come with you, Ella,” said Alan.

Evangeline looked laughingly up at Master Falconer, and then, grasping his big hand in her tiny ones, tried to draw him in.

“ Do you really want me, little one ? ” said he.

Evangeline smiled radiantly, and so they entered.





CHAPTER III.

THE days passed on tranquilly until Evangeline was nearly six years old. In the day time she tended alternately the flowers and the chickens, and in the evening came Master Falconer, and Evangeline did what she was pleased to call her lessons.

The old man was very bright and happy during that hour, and I think looked forward to it as the great happiness of his day.

Alan's love for his child had, if it were possible, increased, and seldom a month passed without his spending a few days at least with her.

What would not he have given to have

dared to bid her call him father? The perpetual suppression of his feelings (so contrary to his nature) tantalised and irritated him.

Indeed, he at one time conceived a mad desire to carry her off to Italy—France—anywhere! where he might own her as his child. He pictured to himself the villa by the lake, the child handsomely dressed, attentively waited upon, his little companion and *confidante*.

And then he remembered that grandeur was foreign to the nature both of mother and child. Evangeline, with her simple tastes, would only fade and pine in the palace that his fancy raised for her.

And what would the result of that life be to her afterwards? Far better that she should be brought up humbly in quiet Eng-

land, as a nameless orphan, than known and courted in Italy as the illegitimate daughter of a rich man.

Evangeline was beginning to ask questions. One day when Alan had taken her into the wood she wandered away from him, following a butterfly. Over moss and primroses, she danced, singing gaily to herself, the butterfly ever eluding her grasp, until she came to a break in the trees that fenced in one side of her path.

Here voices attracted her attention, and she paused to look and listen. On the sunny grass before her was seated a little picnic party, consisting of father, mother and half-a-dozen children.

The mother was petting the two youngest, the father talking to the elder ones, telling them a story perhaps.

The mother's eye soon caught sight of the little stranger and beckoned Ella to her.

"Got lost, little one?"

Evangeline shook her head.

"But who are you with? I don't hear anyone. With your mother?"

Evangeline lifted her great blue eyes from the baby to the woman, saying—

"I have not got a mother."

"She is dead, perhaps," said the woman, softly.

Again Evangeline shook her head, and answered sadly—

"I never had one—not at all." And, with a little sob, she turned away; but when she came to the break in the trees she looked round again sorrowfully upon the little family repeating to herself—"I never had a mother—not at all."

Alan looked up from the book he was reading as he lay on the grass beneath one of the grand old trees, and saw his child coming towards him under the flickering, sun-tinted shadows. She walked slowly, with bent head, and she carried no flowers.

He thought she must be tired with her play, and throwing his book down he went to meet her and took her in his arms.

“Tired, my darling?”

“No.”

“Then you are hungry and want to go home to tea?”

“No.” And then suddenly looking up into his face: “What is it like to have a mother? Had you ever a mother?”

Alan winced, but answered—

“Yes; I had a mother.”

“And was she kind and loving?”

“ Yes—yes, very.”

The child said no more, but leaned her head on his shoulder and sighed.

* * * * *

That night, when Mrs. Brooke had tucked her up in her little white bed, Evangeline said softly—

“ Granny.”

“ Well, honey ?”

“ When I was in the wood to-day there was a mother there, and she asked me if I had not lost my mother, and I told her I never had had one.”

Mrs. Brooke was smoothing down the quilt. She said nothing for some seconds, and then, kneeling down, she took the little hand in her own and said—

“ Oh, yes, Ella, you have a mother—a

mother who loves you very, very dearly indeed."

"Oh, where is she? Why does she not come to me?" cried the child.

"Where was she?" Perhaps standing unseen beside them, with hands folded in prayer, or raised in blessing! Who can answer?

"She is dead, honey," cried the old woman, clasping the child to her and kissing her. "She is dead; but she is your mother still, and loves you very, very much. Always remember that."

"Dead!" said Evangeline, in a tone of disappointment. "When was that?"

"When you were quite a baby."

"Then she'll have forgotten all about me by now. Jesus might have let her stay with me. He has got His own mother. What should He want mine for?"

“Hush, hush,” said Mrs. Brooke, horrified. “You must not talk like that. Besides, she is happiest there.”

“How can she be happy away from me, and in a strange place, too?” said Evangeline; and, refusing to be comforted, she turned her face sullenly to the wall.

END OF PART II.



PART III.

CHAPTER I.

HEATHERBY was under a cloud. The childless wife was dead. She was nothing loth to die. The wife-beating of vulgar life is a mere trifle compared to the genteel misery that she underwent. Love without marriage is a bad thing truly, but is marriage without love any better?

When Emily Lumley, a poor baronet's daughter, had attentions paid her by Squire Gascoigne, it was considered that it would be a good match for both parties. He had wealth, she rank. So in due time he pro-

posed, and she, being before instructed of her mother, accepted him. Well! it was considered in olden times a pious act to sacrifice a child to the gods, and why not to Plutus as well as another? And so, ere six weeks had passed they stood side by side at the altar and perjured themselves in cold blood.

“I require and charge you both, that if either of you know any impediment, ye do now confess it.”

I wonder, did Richard Gascoigne think then of the women he had wronged? Did Emily Lumley remember the bitter parting from her lover? As far as the feelings of the bride were concerned there was only one sentence in the service which she cared to hear—“With all my worldly goods I thee endow.”

But it is all past and over now. The

Sacrament had been trampled in the dirt to propitiate him who said—"All these things will I give Thee if thou wilt fall down and worship *me*." And past the hope of children, the children whose love the unloved wife thought would compensate for every thing. And past the weariness and sickness, the blessed sickness that brought spiritual health and made the worn out girl happier on her death-bed than she had ever been in her life. Past everything but a lying tablet and God's mercy.

Mrs. Gascoigne had had one friend at Heatherby—Gilbert Hurst. Her own family never knew what she suffered. When they visited her she roused herself and made excuses for her husband's absences; very false excuses, no doubt, they were, but would you have a slave own that the master who has bought her is sick of his bargain?

And after all it is not customary in fashionable life for married people to show much affection for each other; indeed, it is scarcely "the thing." No! they leave that to Phillis and Corydon. Happy Phillis! Lucky Corydon! Mrs. Gascoigne never complained of her husband, and Lady Lumley was too much engaged with her four unmarried daughters to trouble herself about the one who had "made the good match." She would scold her playfully sometimes for looking so pale, and entreat her to try whatever fad in the way of doctors, or wine, or climate happened just then to be fashionable. Had she known about the blood spitting she would have held up her hands in horror, ordered her off at once to Nice, and suggested that Susan, Clara and Florence should accompany her.

About a year and a half before the time of her death she had, it is true, an illness so serious that it ought to have opened Lady Lumley's eyes. Then, as now, Mr. Gascoigne had been called hastily home. When he reached Heatherby his wife was not expected to survive the day. The ladies of the Lumley family were sprinkled over the house on sundry sofas. They were all given to nervous susceptibility, and the depth and tenderness of their feelings absolutely forbade their presence in the sick room. Wherever Mr. Gascoigne went he came upon a prostrate female form, becomingly attired, and profusely scented ; and after being wept over five times, forbidden by the doctor to enter Mrs. Gascoigne's apartment, and entreated pathetically by his mother-in-law not to break down, he locked himself, with a

sigh of relief, in the sacred seclusion of his smoking-room. His mother-in-law would not pursue him there he thanked his stars.

Slowly and imperceptibly Mrs. Gascoigne gained strength after that illness. At first all that the doctor and nurse could say was, that she was no worse, and then, very gradually, it became very evident that she was indeed, getting a little stronger, a very little, every day. As soon as she was declared out of danger Mr. Gascoigne was called away from home by "business," and Lady Lumley and her daughters hastened to town to prepare for the coming season.

In June Mrs. Gascoigne and her maid went down to Brighton. She certainly seemed much better while she was there, and found out an old schoolfellow who had "married beneath her," and was now the triumphant

mother of a lot of noisy boys and girls. It was a new life for poor Mrs. Gascoigne, and she was tolerably happy, but with the shooting season came the Squire, and carried her "home."

All that autumn and winter he was backwards and forwards between London and Heatherby, but in the spring he went again abroad, and "husband and wife" parted for ever, in this world at any rate. Perhaps—hereafter—he may behold her afar off as Dives did Lazarus, but in that country of peace he may not trouble, and she is "at rest."





CHAPTER II.

SOME further information concerning Mrs. Gascoigne, supplied by a poor relation of Lady Lumley's—Cousin Bessie—a “meddlesome old maid” :—

“How well I remember the circumstances relating to Emily Lumley's marriage. She was just eighteen then, very pretty, with that delicate blush-rose beauty that is so sweet in its prime, and so sadly beautiful, alas! in its decay. I am, as Mr. — knows, a distant connection of the Lumley family, a very distant one, indeed, and a poor one into the bargain. One hot July day a rose-coloured note came to my London lodgings

begging 'dear Cousin Bessie' to come and visit them at Brighton. I was not fond of Lady Lumley, or her vapid elder daughters; but I had always loved little Emily, and Brighton, though hot, would be less hot than London. Lady Lumley, I knew, always expected me to make myself useful; I had been with her last autumn, and, being a sentimental old maid, had taken an interest in furthering a little love affair between Emily and my dear young friend Robert Brierly. Was Robert there now, I wondered? It was long since we had met. Two days after the invitation reached me I appeared at Lady Lumley's Brighton lodgings. The lodging-house servant did not offer to accompany me upstairs, but saying that I should find Lady Lumley in the drawing-room, retired to her own peculiar region of dirt and darkness

down the cellar steps. The drawing-room door was ajar, and, as I went upstairs, I could hear Lady Lumley's monotonous whining drawl—half-pleading—half-peremptory. Now and then another voice joined softly in. The two were so much engrossed with the subject of their conversation that I entered the room before they were aware.

“‘So glad to see you again,’ said I, advancing.

“Lady Lumley started, and, forgetting herself for the moment, actually rose from her chair to greet me. Not so Mrs. Brierly, the other speaker. Mrs. Brierly was never taken by surprise, never off her guard. She was always coldly polite to me, and now, putting out her thin white hand, she permitted me to touch it, and ‘hoped I was well—London was doubtless very hot just now.

How much I must appreciate dear Lady Lumley's kindness in inviting me to the sea-side, etc.,' and drooping her white eyelashes over her passionless eyes, she relapsed into silence. Mrs. Brierly, Sir Charles Lumley's cousin, was a widow. Her husband, a rich *purvenu*, had, before his death, lost all his money on the turf, leaving her almost as poor as I was. She was a thin-lipped, colourless woman, one whom I had always apostrophised to myself as belonging in spirit to the feline tribe—a white cat with her claws tucked in—purring over you one moment and wounding you the next. Cowardly and treacherous as the class of which I considered her to be the representative, I enquired how the girls were. Was Emily better? I had heard she was not very strong.

“‘Never better! Does she not look so,

Selina?’ turning to Mrs. Brierly, who replied—

“ ‘I never saw her looking better than she does at present.’

“ Another short silence ensued, broken by Mrs. Brierly rising and leaving the room. Lady Lumley sighed softly as the door closed upon her.

“ ‘Yes! dear Emily is so well just now! so bright! Yes—and! well, my dear, you must prepare yourself for some news. The truth is I am expecting daily, I may say *hourly*, to hear of her engagement.’

“ ‘Engagement!’ cried I, “is she not already engaged?’

“ Lady Lumley coloured and looked cross.

“ ‘Oh, you allude to that little affair with Robert Brierly—quite a boy and girl concern, and over long ago. Besides, my dear, it was

so utterly out of the question for both of them. Oh, yes! dear Selina was quite as anxious as I was to have it broken off.'

"I was silent. How inscrutable are the designs of a mother! Only last autumn had I been called to these Brighton sands to walk up and down upon them, and *chaperone* the Miss Lumleys, and had we not been constantly accompanied by Robert Brierly, who was visiting Lady Lumley? The young curate was a very great favourite of mine, and I had been delighted to note the evident liking that he and Emily had for each other. I had hoped that an early marriage with one so wise and true as Robert would prevent her falling into the wretched, frivolous manner of life that her mother and elder sisters led.

"She was only seventeen, gentle and pliable,

and could easily be moulded to a noble purpose by a master-hand. She had never written to tell me that her engagement was broken off, but then, as I remembered, Florence, not Emily, had lately been my correspondent.

“‘I suppose,’ said Lady Lumley, ‘you are thinking about last autumn. Well! mothers have their griefs and disappointments of which you, happy maiden ladies, know nothing. The fact is, my dear, we hoped—Selina and I, that is—that Robert’s attentions were intended for Susan. She has, you know, £300 a year left her by her god-mother, Lady Chester; it is, of course, only a trifle, but it is better than nothing, and she is nearly thirty, and such a very sensible managing person, and altogether so very well suited for a clergyman’s wife, much more so

than poor dear Emily. Besides which, there is a living in the Chester family which might not improbably be given to Susan's husband. The young Chesters declare they won't go into the Church. Oh, dear! Selina and I arranged it all so nicely! but as I said just now, we mothers have our trials.'

" 'I really thought last autumn that Emily and Robert were attached to each other.'

" 'You dear sentimental creature! But what did you mean them to marry upon?'

" 'They would, of course, have been obliged to wait.'

" 'Ah! I don't approve of long engagements. I always tell my girls so—always! And don't you wish you knew who Emily's new admirer is?'

" 'Any one I know? I hope he is worthy of her.'

“ Judge for yourself. Here they come.’

“ As she spoke I heard footsteps ascending the stairs, and presently the drawing-room door was thrown open, and a group of laughing girls, rosy and bright with the sea breezes, entered, followed by a tall, military-looking man of an uncertain age.

“ ‘ My dear Mr. Gascoigne, let me introduce Miss Smyth to you. Emily, my love, here is Cousin Bessie.’

“ Emily blushing and confused, came forward and kissed me, and then silently seated herself beside me.

“ Florence monopolised the conversation and rattled on from one subject to another. Afterwards, when we all rose to dress for dinner, Lady Lumley called me aside into her own room and begged me not to mention Robert’s name. ‘ That fancy of his for Emily

was a most unfortunate one, poor fellow ! I never thought he would have been attracted by any of my girls, except my sensible Susan. Emily has long ceased to think of him, but still we always avoid his name.'

" 'I will do as you wish about it,' said I.

" 'Thanks !' murmured Lady Lumley.

" How well I remember that first evening. Mr. Gascoigne dined with us, and after dinner followed us upstairs almost immediately, saying that the sound of our voices in the drawing-room tantalised him.

" He took up his position on the round central ottoman, the four elder sisters hovering, houri-like, about him and keeping up an innocent fire of badinage and *repartée* among themselves for the Sultan's amusement. In this Emily took no part, but sat at a distance leisurely fanning herself.

“She was in white muslin and had thrown about her an Indian scarf of blue and silver. Her pretty fair hair was dressed in the Marie Antoinette fashion (she had discovered at a fancy ball how well it became her). I was very much struck with the change that had taken place in her since the autumn. The pretty smiling girl, fresh from school, had become a lovely woman, and one whose gesture and glance constantly reminded you that she knew the power of beauty and, perhaps, its money-worth. Just then she was evidently queening it over everybody.

“She and Mr. Gascoigne rarely spoke to each other, but his eyes followed her every movement and constantly anticipated her wishes. Certainly if the husband would prove as attentive as the woer, Emily would indeed be a well-cared for wife.

“ She looked happy that night, I thought, as she reclined in her chair, her blue eyes half closed, toying with her fan. As I sat watching her and noticing the little glances with which she sometimes favoured her admirer, my thoughts went back to that autumn time when I had paced these Brighton sands a lamb-like *chaperone*.

“ How different she had been then ! Then she had looked up with simple reverence, and the lover had been a wise, tender protector, not a fawning slave like this middle-aged Apollo. I contrasted the chat of this evening with our old quiet talks by the sea-shore, and the whole thing jarred upon me, and I suddenly remembered that I had letters to write, and rising, I begged Lady Lumley to excuse me for an hour. She bade me go into the breakfast-room, saying I should be quiet there—

quite alone. But in this she was mistaken, for, as I entered the room, I saw the trim figure of Mrs. Brierly at the writing-table in the window. Mrs. Brierly affected a Puritanical simplicity of dress, a kind of cross between a widow and a Sister of Mercy.

“‘Oh, Miss Smyth!’ said she in a chill tone, looking up as I entered.

“There are persons who rave about Mrs. Brierly and call her a ‘sweet woman;’ the expression of the thin pale face beneath the tulle widow’s cap that turned to me from the writing-table was not at all sweet.

“‘I fear I shall interrupt you,’ said I, opening the door, ‘I have letters to write, and Lady Lumley suggested that I should come here. But I will go to my own room.’

“But no! Mrs. Brierly would not hear of my doing so, so we scribbled on together, she

at the table in the window, I at that in the middle of the room. At length Mrs. Brierly rose.

“ ‘ I have been writing to my son Robert,’ she said quietly, as she lit a taper and sealed her letter ; ‘ you have not seen him lately, I think, Miss Smyth ? ’

“ ‘ The last time I saw him,’ replied I, ‘ was in this house, eight months ago.’

“ ‘ Really ! Ah well ! eight months are a long time. Then I suppose you have not heard that Robert is to be married soon ? ’

“ ‘ Robert is to be married soon ! ’ exclaimed I.

“ ‘ Yes,’ continued she, placidly ; ‘ at least, I had a letter by this afternoon’s post speaking of it as an event that would most probably take place very shortly. Dear Robert ! I have written just now to express my full

approval. It is, perhaps, too early in the day to mention the lady's name.' And she paused.

"I did not ask to have the name confided to me, for I did not believe a word of the story.

"'You have heard from Robert lately then?' said I.

"'Well no! I have not heard *from* Robert lately. He is a most wretched correspondent; rarely writes to me more than the merest note. No! I am quite dependent upon mutual friends for news of him. Dear Robert! I am so pleased,' she cooed, as, gathering up her dainty belongings, she left the room.

"When she had left me to myself I took pen and paper and wrote a little note to Robert, saying what I had heard from his

mother, and begging him to accept my congratulations.

“It was too late for the letter to go that night, but it could leave Brighton by the early morning post, and he would receive it in London that evening.

“After I had finished writing, I sat recalling the events of last autumn. I remembered how Emily had come blushing into my room one night on her way to bed, and had thrown her arms round my neck and whispered something that was so sweet to me to hear and so sweet to her to tell. I remembered, too, how cross Lady Lumley had been the next day, and how Susan had suddenly departed to visit an old schoolfellow. I remembered and noted now many little things I had scarcely heeded at the time. Yes! it had been no ‘tacit understanding,’ nothing

of the kind; but a regular, authorised engagement. Had Emily not accepted a ring from him?—a little pearl ring! Where was it now I wondered? I came at last to the conclusion that Lady Lumley, having allowed Robert to be so constantly with his cousins—as Mrs. Brierly chose to call them—trusting, of course, that he would form the attachment that his mother was always hinting about, and marry that good but plain woman, ‘sensible Susan’ (who was so well adapted for a clergyman’s wife!), had not the face to refuse him when he proposed for little Emily, yet had resolved, nevertheless, to break it off as soon as might be. The breaking off, no doubt, had been hastened by the appearance on the scene of the more wealthy suitor. I loved the poor lad, and trusted it had been done gently and considerately.

Truly, said I to myself, *Emily* has not suffered.

* * * * *

“ A picnic had been arranged for the next day, and the crowded drag and subsequent fuss (which invariably accompanied Lady Lumley’s picnics) prevented my having the conversation I had intended to have had with Emily’s sisters. From neither Lady Lumley nor Mrs. Brierly was I likely to hear anything but a highly prejudiced version.

“ The day after the picnic brought me a letter from Robert—

“ ‘ DEAR COUSIN BESSIE—

“ ‘ Whatever could my mother have meant by telling you that I was about to be married ? Six weeks ago I received a letter from Lady Lumley, telling me that as

Emily and I had been engaged for six months, and my prospects were not any better than they were on the day I proposed to her, she felt herself obliged, "as a mother," to request that the correspondence between us should cease for the present. There was also a good deal more, to the effect that people who are not in a position to marry ought not to propose. There was not a word about Emily's feelings or wishes. In my reply, I reminded her that I had not proposed hastily, but after considerable encouragement from herself.

"I begged permission to see Emily once more; but the answer to this was, "Not at present," and with that the matter ended. She has not returned either my letters or the ring and other things I gave her. What am I to think? I love the poor child as much as ever.

“ ‘ For pity’s sake, write and tell me if I may still dare to hope. Poor Emily must have had some presentiment of what was going to happen, for the last time we met she was in such wretched spirits, and entreated me to defer my departure as long as possible. I suppose it would be dishonourable to send her a message by you; but pray write soon and tell me how she is. Remember, I have not heard even her name mentioned for six weeks.

“ ‘ I am thankful to say I have plenty of hard work at my new curacy, and that shortens the days.

“ ‘ Believe me, my dear old friend, to remain

“ ‘ Yours affectionately,

“ ‘ ROBERT BRIERLY.’

“ ‘ The lady my mother wants me to marry

is Lady Masham; perhaps you know her. Her husband was a cork-cutter, and was knighted during his mayoralty; she is a fussy, High Church woman, fair, fat and forty. I suppose her informer was that indefatigable gossip, Miss MacWhirter. I have done nothing whatever to give rise to the report.'

* * * * *

"We did not breakfast until ten o'clock at Brighton, receiving our letters beforehand in our own room, so there was generally a little pleasant interchange of gossip at the breakfast table.

"Lady Lumley had ensconced herself behind the silver tea urn, and the sisters were buzzing over their plates when I entered the room. Mrs. Brierly almost immediately followed me.

“‘Have you had letters this morning, Selina?’ asked Lady Lumley.

“Mrs. Brierley was placidly tapping her egg.

“‘Yes! Two; one from Flora MacWhirter, most positively confirming what she said in her last, and another from Robert himself.’

“‘And what does he say?’ asked Lady Lumley, eagerly. (Emily was reading her own letters on the window-seat, possibly on the look-out for Mr. Gascoigne.)

“‘What does Robert say? Well!’ and Mrs. Brierly shrugged her shoulders. ‘What do people generally say under those circumstances? They deny the soft impeachment, do they not? Oh, I think nothing of that! There is Flora’s letter. You will see what Lady Masham said to her only yesterday morning.’

“‘I also had a letter from Robert this morning,’ said I quietly.

“Lady Lumley coloured and looked guilty. Not so Mrs. Brierly. She glanced at me a second with her steady, pale eyes, and remarked coldly that she was not aware that I and her son corresponded.

“‘Occasionally,’ said I. ‘In his letter of this morning he happens to allude to the report you mentioned yesterday, Mrs. Brierly, and he says that it is a mistake altogether; there is no truth in it at all, you have been misinformed. Do you know Lady Masham?’

“‘Oh, yes, a most delightful person; so kind and handsome. Does not look a day older than dear Robert, and a very good Churchwoman. I should never be happy for dear Robert to marry one who was otherwise than a good Churchwoman. And as to what

Robert says—. But perhaps his mother might be allowed to see his letter ?

“I replied that I had left it upstairs. Emily was bending over her flowers in the window, and making a feint of re-arranging them, but I noticed that her hand trembled.

“‘Emily, my love, breakfast is ready,’ murmured Mrs. Brierly.

“So Emily left her flowers, and with a pale face but composed manner, came to the vacant chair and ate her breakfast in silence, and Mrs. Brierly, turning away from me, discussed some picnic arrangements with Susan and Florence, now and then appealing to one or other of the rest of the party, myself not included. Before breakfast was over, Mr. Gascoigne called, and I escaped to my own room.

“I had been there about half an hour

when my reading was interrupted by a knock at the door.

“ I said—‘ Come in,’ and Emily entered.

“ ‘ Cousin Bessie, I want you to read these,’ and taking the chair beside me, she put some letters on my lap. They were from Flora MacWhirter, and dated about a month back. They were addressed to Mrs. Brierly. After the usual preliminary burst of chat, the first letter went on to say—

“ ‘ How pleased they all were with their new curate, and how hard he was working. He had already persuaded the stupid old vicar to make some important alterations in the manner of conducting the service. And how he was aided and abetted in everything by that dear, darling Lady Masham, who, although she lived miles away, having now

taken a *most handsome* mansion in Grosvenor Place, yet never missed a service. It was quite a saying that her beautiful pair of bays came to the church door as regularly as the clerk, and Mr. Brierly, report said, spent half his time at her house, and never took any steps *whatever* in parochial matters without her advice.'

“ The second letter said—

“ ‘ MY DARLING FRIEND—Mrs. Brierly must not be surprised that everyone was beginning to couple Lady Masham’s name with Mr. Brierly’s; and talking of names,’ pursued the artless Flora, ‘ would she become on the marriage Lady Masham Brierly, Lady Brierly Masham, Lady Brierly, or lose the title lady, her husband being only a knight, and

become simply Mrs. Robert Brierly? She entreated Mrs. Brierly to set her right on this point by return of post.'

"The third letter contained the information that Miss MacWhirter *knew for a fact* that Lady Masham and Mr. Brierly had seen each other every day for the last ten days, and that he had afternoon tea at her house on three occasions, and lunch twice during the ten days, and she also *knew for a fact* that a mutual friend had challenged him on the matter, and he had as good as owned that there *was something in it*.

"There were two other letters, all written in the same strain. Emily knelt beside me while I read them, and watched me closely.

"Well,' said she, anxiously, after I had

glanced the letters over, she pointing out to me the passages in which Robert's name was mentioned.

“ ‘My dear child, you really do not attach any weight to this silly gossip? I thought you knew Flora MacWhirter's character for vain imaginings.’

“ ‘But Mrs. Brierly made enquiries from other people, too, and they confirmed it all. Do you think, Cousin Bessie, I should have permitted Mr. Gascoigne's visits, if I had not thought it was all true? It was not nice to see how soon Robert could console himself,’ and her lip trembled.

“ ‘It is quite probable that the widow is pursuing Robert, but I am quite certain that he has not the slightest intention of being caught.’

“ ‘Then why does he go to her house?’

“‘That part of Flora’s letter may be a fabrication. She is very untruthful; or it may be that she sent for him upon some parochial matter. Oh, those religious widows! But, however it may be as regards *her*, there is no truth in it as regards *him*. I know that for a fact, as Flora would say.’

“‘You have heard from him?’ said Emily, in a low voice.

“‘Yes, I have heard from him.’

“I considered the matter a moment, and thought of the way my poor Robert had been plotted against; then—I am afraid it was a very unjustifiable thing to do—I put his letter into her hand. She took it to the window and read it there. Many minutes passed, and then she gave it back to me in silence.

“‘Oh, what am I to do?’ she moaned at length.

“ ‘Have you engaged yourself to Mr. Gascoigne?’

“ ‘Oh, no!’ and she shuddered, and sank down on the stool at my feet, and covered her face with her hands.

“ ‘I was dreadfully miserable at first, when mamma made me break it off,’ said she, after a pause, “and then mamma showed me those letters, and I got angry. Poor, poor Robert! how I have wronged him,’ and she took the letter off my knee and read it again.

“ ‘It is a very unfortunate affair,’ said I, ‘and Mr. Gascoigne will have just reason to be offended at the way he has been treated.’

“ Emily looked up from the letter, and turned frightened eyes to me.

“ ‘Mamma must tell him,’ said she, ‘I dare not.’

“ At this moment a sharp knock at the

door was immediately followed by the entrance of Mrs. Brierly. Emily, acting on the first impulse, crushed Robert's letter in her hand, then, as Mrs. Brierly paused a moment silently in the doorway, she remembered herself, and rising, and looking defiant, said—

“‘ Aunt Selina (the girls all called her so), you wished, I think, to see Cousin Bessie's letter. If Cousin Bessie does not object to your seeing it, *I* do not. May I give her it, Cousin Bessie?’

“‘ Would Robert be pleased?’ whispered I.

“‘ I *intend* to see it,’ said Mrs. Brierly, taking the crumpled letter out of Emily's hand. Quietly smoothing it out, she read it leisurely, holding it in one hand and her eye-glass in the other.

“Passion of passions with Mrs. Brierly was white heat, and as she turned each

page of the letter, her pale face grew a shade paler, and her lips became more rigidly compressed. When she had finished reading the letter, she folded it neatly, and put it in her pocket.

“ ‘Your mamma wants you in her dressing-room, Emily,’ she said, and then turning to me, continued in a voice that she in vain strove to steady, ‘Miss Smyth, we shall be obliged to request you to shorten the visit with which you are *honouring* us. Your room will be required to-morrow for another guest.’ Opening the door, she beckoned to Emily to accompany her.

“ ‘If you are going to mamma, tell her I will come in five minutes,’ said Emily.

“ ‘Your mamma wishes for you *at once*. If you have anything more to say to Miss Smyth you had better say it now.’

“ Emily came to me, and threw her arms round my neck.

“ ‘ Dear, dear Cousin Bessie,’ she cried, ‘ write to Robert to-day, and tell him the way I have been imposed upon. Yes ! Aunt Selina, *imposed* upon ! And tell him, Cousin Bessie, that if he is true to me I will be true to him. He need not fear. I never loved anyone else, and never shall. And dear Cousin Bessie, mamma has treated you shamefully, only I don’t believe it is her doing. No, Aunt Selina, I *don’t* ! And if you were not Robert’s mother, I would never speak to you again. Never ! ’

“ ‘ Have you finished, Emily ? ’ enquired Aunt Selina, quietly. She was standing with the handle of the door in her hand, looking down upon her with a dangerous gleam in her cold eyes.

“ ‘Yes, I have finished. Good-bye, dear, dear Cousin Bessie. Mind you write to Robert to-night,’ and, sobbing bitterly, she left me, and, passing Mrs. Brierly quickly, ran up to Lady Lumley’s room, and I heard her enter, locking the door after her, before Mrs. Brierly had gained the top of the stairs.

“But poor Emily, as I afterwards heard, burst into such a flood of indignant reproaches, that her mother, declaring that Emily was going into hysterics, and that she herself would do the same, rang for a maid, and with the maid glided in Mrs. Brierly.

* * * * *

“Scarcely two months had passed from the time of my Brighton visit, when I received a *Morning Post*, addressed to me in Mrs. Brierly’s hand. Glancing anxiously down the

columns, my eye caught the following paragraph headed ‘Approaching Marriage in High Life.—We understand that a marriage has been arranged between Emily, the youngest daughter of the late Sir Charles Lumley, Bart., K.C.B., &c., and Mr. Gascoigne, the wealthy owner of the Heatherby and Fairfield estates.’

“Though deeply grieved, I was not surprised. I had heard nothing from any member of the family since my abrupt dismissal from Brighton, but I quite knew the system of worry and persecution that Emily must have been subjected to of late ; and knowing also her indolent, ease-loving temperament, I was not astonished to find that she had given in at length for the sake of peace. I afterwards found, as I had expected, that Mrs. Brierly had had a large hand in the matter. She

fancied, no doubt, that if Emily was once disposed of, the way to Robert's marriage with Lady Masham would be rendered tolerably easy. At first Emily had proved more stubborn than they had anticipated. For a week after my departure, she insisted on remaining in her own room, and declined seeing any one except the maid. Then Mrs. Brierly edged in one day after the maid, and, whispering to the maid to leave them, burst into tears—she had quite a dramatic faculty both for tears and smiles!—and besought her, prayed her, not to ruin her son for life. Then she petted, pitied and caressed her, and at last, with sighs and cast down glances, took a leaf out of Locksley Hall. 'They were treacherous guides, the feelings; she herself was not exempt. Truly she herself had suffered.' In short, confided to her dear

Emily a touching history of her own early days. Her lover was described, their mutual poverty, their parting. It was quite heart-rending, and then filial duty distinguished itself by a placid marriage, followed by children and calm happiness. (Query the 'calm happiness' in Mrs. Brierly's case. Emily thought she remembered hearing that Uncle Brierly was very unsteady, but she did not interrupt.)

"This pattern wife even went on to declare that (excepting in very unusual cases, exceedingly rare among educated people) married persons were far happier five years after marriage, if they had chosen their partners sensibly, than if they had married merely from inclination. Nay, she insinuated coyly that 'nice-minded' girls did not form passionate attachments, and instanced

numerous cases of love-marriages that had turned out ill and *vice versâ*. She was quite certain that with one so kind and affectionate as was Mr. Gascoigne, Emily could not fail to be happy eventually.

“ ‘ I will never speak to him again ! ’ cried Emily.

“ ‘ Well, my love, you must please yourself about that, but, as regards your other friends, why should you seclude yourself from them ? The Brown-Jones are distracted about your illness. Dear girls, they have been daily to enquire. You have (I had better tell you) been suffering from excruciating headache—’

“ ‘ Heartache,’ interrupted Emily.

“ ‘ Excruciating headache, and they and all your other friends have been most kind in enquiring after you. But really you must show yourself again now. You must, indeed.

Come, dry your eyes, and let me order a carriage.'

" ' Shall I see Mr. Gascoigne ? ' "

" ' Oh, dear no ! He has gone away for a couple of days, I know. ' "

" And so Emily, hunted and worried and longing for a breath of fresh air, dressed and drove out, and afterwards, sullen and dignified, came down to dinner. Mrs. Brierly, that skilful diplomatist, dictated the ' management,' and it was decreed that Emily was to be treated as a suffering angel and a martyr to circumstances. .

" The next evening Mr. Gascoigne—who I think must have been instructed by Mrs. Brierly, he played his part so well—came in quietly, unannounced, when the ladies were dawdling over their tea—that conciliating cup ! He enquired tenderly if Emily was

better, laid some exquisite flowers on the table beside her, and then sat down by Lady Lumley and talked quietly about the news of the day. If Emily had intended to snub him, she was obliged to relinquish her design, for he did not give her the opportunity. A man who makes no advances cannot be kept at a distance. It is very rarely, indeed, that patience and perseverance do not win in the long run. Her evident indifference only piqued Mr. Gascoigne, and gave a zest to the pursuit. All this I heard subsequently from Susan.

* * * * *

“The evening after I had received the *Morning Post*, as I was sitting by the fire—it was a cold September—I heard a step I knew ascend the stairs, and Robert entered.

Dear Robert ! I wonder if other old maids ever experience the same feelings that I do about young people ? I had always felt a strong motherly kindness towards Robert, the more so when I found the utter want of sympathy that existed between him and his mother. All her affection was centred on her younger son, Fred ; Robert, with his high principles and lofty aims (he was the very counterpart of his grandfather, old Archdeacon Brierly, who died before he was born) was entirely beyond her comprehension. The only motherliness she ever showed towards him, that I could see, was a kind of jealousy of his caring for other people, and a tenacious exacting of obedience in trifling matters that must have fretted and worried him, although he never showed any impatience. Robert shook hands, and then

drew his chair near the fire and sat, without speaking, a moment or so, warming his hands before the fire. He looked, I thought, very ill and unhappy. No doubt he had seen that paper.

“ ‘Cousin Bessie,’ said he, at length, ‘have you seen this?’ and he put a paper on my knee and pointed to *the* paragraph.

“ ‘Yes, I saw it this morning.’

“ ‘And you believe it?’

“ ‘I did not answer.

“ ‘It is impossible!’ he cried. ‘Besides, if it is true, are they not treating me very ill? Why was I to hear it first thus? It is cruel.’

“ ‘Poor boy,’ said I, laying my hand on his.

“ ‘Oh, Cousin Bessie, it is hard, is it not? But I have made up my mind what to do.

They are not in Town; I have been to the house to enquire. They are still at Brighton. I will go down this evening, and see Lady Lumley to-night, if possible. I cannot bear the suspense. And I trusted her!’

“‘It may only be rumour,’ said I.

“‘But she must have done something to give rise to it, and in the position she was, as regarded me, she ought to have been so careful. Oh, dear! dear! and I trusted her. I had such faith in her.’

“‘Going down to Brighton to-night? Why it is nearly seven. You had better write to Lady Lumley.’

“‘No, I want to know the truth. You see this state of things is so unsettling, I cannot give my mind to work a bit. Think what the last five months have been. First, that letter from Lady Lumley, and then that

business while you were at Brighton, and your treasure of a letter to me the day you left with Emily's promises in—promises! It made me so happy, and now, all in a moment—'

"He buried his head in his hands and groaned.

"In vain I tried to dissuade him from going to Brighton, and begged him to write instead.

"No,' said he, 'that would put them on their guard. Emily is the only truthful one among them, poor child. If—if—I ever do get her I will keep her as much as possible away from them all,' and he broke into bitter complaints of Lady Lumley's treatment of him—cowardly underhand ways. 'Do you know that man, Gascoigne?' he asked.

"I told him of what I had seen of him at Brighton.

“I do not know him personally, but I know plenty about him, and Lady Lumley knows very well the kind of man he is. To think of my little pure child being given to a wretch like that,’ and he started up and paced the room. ‘Ah! do you not see what her life with him would be?’ he cried, ‘a toy admired for a time, soon wearied of and cast aside. Poor—poor—little child. But, Cousin Bessie, you must be her friend.’

“‘If I may, indeed I will, but you know I am now forbidden the house.’

“Seven o’clock struck.

“‘I must go now,’ said he; ‘wish me God speed.’

“‘Dear Robert! and you will come to me as soon as you return?’

“‘Yes, yes. Good-bye, old friend.’

* * * * *

“As I entered the breakfast-room next morning Robert came forward to greet me. I looked into his face, I had no need to ask how his errand had sped.

“‘My poor boy,’ said I, ‘I see it is as I feared.’ I drew him to the breakfast-table and he sat down beside me.

“‘Yes,’ said he, ‘it is all over, *quite* over, and I must begin life again. I suppose one can do that at twenty-nine?’

“‘*You* can, Robert, easily. Some people could not. If you were a coward, or a *fainéant*, it would be different.’

“While I was speaking he was feeling for something in his pocket, and presently took out a little package and laid it on the table beside me.

“‘*Not* a coward? I want you to take that and lock it up. If I had it I might forget

where it was and stumble upon it when I did not expect. Open it if you like ; perhaps it would be best, and burn the letters and do what you choose with the rest.'

" 'The letters had certainly better be burnt. May I burn them now ?'

"He nodded and I took the little packet at once, and kneeling down on the hearth-rug, with my back to him, opened the parcel, and taking out the poor letters, put them gently into the fire. It was a holocaust !

" 'Do what you like with the other things,' said Robert. 'I do not say accept them from me, it would be a mockery ; a faithless betrothal ring is no fit gift for Cousin Bessie,' and he rose from the table and kissed me as he used to do when he was a child.

" 'I will put them in my dressing-case and write your name upon them, and direct, that

in case of my death, they should be sent to you.'

"I folded the packet at once and sealed it, and took it upstairs ; I was anxious to break with the past at once. He had had enough trouble, poor fellow, about that weak girl. If he could forget her—and even though I loved her, I felt how utterly unworthy she was of my Robert—he might soon be thoroughly happy once more, for his heart of hearts was in his parish.

"A month later I received a formal invitation to the wedding breakfast. It is needless, I hope, to say that I declined it, and the day after the ceremony a slice of cake was forwarded to me, accompanied by a most touchingly beautiful epistle from Mrs. Brierly.

"Oh, it was a Christian and forgiving epistle !

“She regretted my absence; one who loved dear Emily, as she believed I did, could not but have rejoiced in her evident happiness. I threw both the cake and the letter into the fire with a less gentle hand than I had thrown in poor Robert’s possession.

“Four years passed. Except on the occasion of the wedding I had never again been invited to visit Lady Lumley. I was not surprised, for I knew she spoke of me as a mischief-making old maid. Florence came to see me occasionally, and gave most gushing accounts of Mrs. Gascoigne’s well doing and a grand description of the house and grounds at Heatherby. Mrs. Brierly, she told me, had taken a house at Severston, to be near Fred, her darling scapegrace son, who was in a bank there. Emily never came to me. I had not written to her again after leaving

Brighton. I did not like to run the chance of having my letters opened by Lady Lumley or Mrs. Brierly. I hoped all was well, and heard nothing to make me think otherwise. Judge them of my grief when I received the following letter :—

“ ‘MADAM—You have no doubt heard of Mrs. Gascoigne’s serious illness. She is just now in a most precarious condition and, as Mr. Gascoigne and Lady Lumley are both abroad and her sisters also, I take the liberty of writing to you to beg you will, if possible, come to her. She has expressed a great desire to see you. Be good enough to reply by telegram stating if you can come, and when.

“ ‘ In haste.

“ ‘ Yours truly,

“ ‘ GILBERT HURST.’ ”

“I telegraphed immediately saying, ‘I will come to-night and reach Heatherby at seven o’clock.’

“I cannot look back now upon that day without shuddering. It was one long evil dream, from the time when I opened the letter in the morning to the time when I found myself in the hall of the Manor at night. A tall white-haired old gentleman came forward to greet me; it was the steward, Gilbert Hurst.

“‘In time, thank God!’ said he, taking my hand, and, showing me into a little sitting room near at hand; he bade me sit down and rest awhile before going upstairs.

“It was well that he did so for I was quite unnerved. The maid who met me at the station had given a most wretched account of Mrs. Gascoigne. I had imagined, when I read Mr. Hurst’s letter, that this had been some

sudden attack of illness ; now I found that her health had been bad for more than a year. And husband and mother both abroad. What could it mean ? ‘To love and to cherish, in sickness and in health.’ Yes Robert’s fears had been realised.

“ ‘Mrs. Gascoigne is anxious to see Miss Smyth.’

“ I started to my feet, the maid who had accompanied me from the train had entered the room.

“ I looked to Mr. Hurst and asked—

“ ‘Had I not better go to her at once ?’

“ ‘Certainly, but pray, my dear madam, control yourself. If you find you are breaking down, leave the room at once. Elton will wait in the dressing-room and be ready to take your place. But Mrs. Gascoigne does not look ill, and she is very cheerful.’

“With noiseless steps we ascended the stairs, and passed along the corridor until we reached the sick chamber. Elton, the maid, entered and signed for me to follow. I watched her as she went to the bed and pushed aside the heavy, richly-tinted curtains and announced my arrival in a soft, clear voice. In another moment I was kneeling by Emily and covering her thin hand with kisses.

“‘Dear, dear Cousin Bessie,’” murmured she.

Like so many things that we look forward to with dread, the meeting was less sad in reality than it was in anticipation.

Emily, placid and sweet, as she was then, seemed to have become once again the Emily of her young girlhood—the gentle, affectionate being I had known long ago. I could scarcely believe that she was seriously ill.

We chatted quietly about matters of common interest, Emily taking the lead, for I was afraid of touching upon dangerous subjects. Then the maid came forward and quietly suggested that it was time for her mistress to prepare for rest. Emily acquiesced and kissed me, and said—

“ ‘ Good night.’

“ At about midnight a tap came at my door.

“ ‘ Mrs. Gascoigne is no worse,’ said Elton, in answer to my frightened face, ‘ but the nurse called me up, and said I had better come and ask if you would mind just going to my mistress for a few moments. She is restless and cannot sleep, and keeps wishing it was daylight, so that she might see you again ; and once she said there was something she wished so much to have said to you last night, but did not get it said. Nurse thought

perhaps she might sleep after she had seen you.'

" 'I will come instantly,' said I.

" 'Oh, Cousin Bessie !' cried Emily, as I entered. 'Nurse, nurse, why did you wake her up ? but I am so glad you have come, so very glad !'

"She was flushed and breathless, very different from the state in which I had left her when I went to bed.

" 'I am not in the least tired,' said I ; 'suppose I sit up with you to-night, and then both nurse and Elton can sleep.'

"But the nurse positively negatived this arrangement, and begging me, in the loud whisper that is so very irritating to a sick person, 'not to remain longer than I could help ; she had just fetched me to satisfy Mrs. Gascoigne, and hoped she would then get to

sleep,' went into the outer room and closed the door after her.

"Emily watched her eagerly out of the room, and then seizing my hand, she said in a whisper—

" 'How is Robert ?' "

"I had been staying with him only a short time before, and gave her a full account of all that concerned him—his church, parish, schools, lodgings, &c. I talked quietly and unconcernedly. Emily, her hot hand grasping mine, and gazing at me so earnestly with the blue eyes that were so painfully bright that night, listened intently. Robert's was a quiet, regular life. I told her how he spent each day. The hours given to study before the early breakfast; the teaching at the school; the visits among the poor; the quiet evensong, and the night-school classes after-

wards ; and I told her how the people loved him. When I ceased she made no comment, but lay back on her pillow.

“ ‘Cousin Bessie,’ said she, after a while. ‘Long ago I wrote a letter for Robert, it was when I was so ill, about two years since, and I thought I was going to die. The letter is just to beg him to forgive me. I wrote on the envelope to be sent in case of my death, but I did not die. It is in my little oak desk, and in my will I said that that desk was to be given to you with all that it contained at the time of my death ; it is there on the table near the window, the key is in my purse. You don’t think it is wrong of me to have written the letter, do you ? You see it is not to be sent to him till I die. I shall not be Mr. Gascoigne’s wife any longer then. My death will free him, and so

it must also free me. In heaven they neither marry nor are given in marriage !’

“The hot fingers that lay in mine trembled nervously. I scarcely knew what to answer, this looking forward to death as a divorce spoke so strongly of the wife’s misery. In vivid contrast came back to me my dear sister’s death-bed, husband and wife clinging to each other to the last, and comforting themselves with the thought of the speedy re-union in Paradise.

“ ‘Cousin Bessie, why do you not answer me ?’

“ ‘My dear, do you want me to take care of your letter for you, and see that it is sent ?’

“ ‘Thank you, and you think Robert will not think it wrong ?’

“ ‘Oh, no, I am sure he will not. Perhaps though, my darling, if he were here he would

rather you tried not to trouble about such things just now.'

" 'I will try not. I have always tried to forget him, but I never could. These four years have been such a struggle, Cousin Bessie, but nobody ever knew, and nobody ever shall know. I shall be glad when the struggle is over; but I have tried to be a good woman. Will you tell Robert that? There were some books that I know he liked, I got all of them that I could remember; and Oh, I have tried to be good. Tell him, Cousin Bessie, that I tried very hard. This is one of the books.'

"Emily took up a little copy of Neale's translations. It opened at the verse—

Brief life is here our portion,
Brief sorrow, short lived care,
The life that knows no ending
The tearless life is there.

“ ‘ Let me read to you a little, it will calm you, and then you will sleep,’ and holding her hand in mine, I read from the book that was open in my hand. The metre soothed her, and before I had read two pages her eyelids drooped, her hand relaxed its grasp, and she was asleep. When I rose to go and turned for one more look, I thought I had never seen her more lovely than she was then. There was a sweet smile on the parted lips as though in her dream she was already dwelling in that land of ‘ Happy Retribution.’

“ At eight o’clock next morning Elton came softly into my room. I asked how her mistress was. She fidgetted about the dressing-table for a moment or two, and then came and drew back the bed curtains, and I saw that she was crying. Presently

she told me that, two hours after I had left Emily, she and the nurse going to rouse her to take some food, they found her dead. She had died in her sleep, died in her happy dream, died with the smile on her lip. Poor tired child! gone from the dream to the reality.

“I remained at Heatherby for the funeral; not at the Manor, I could not bring myself to meet Mr. Gascoigne, and good Mr. Hurst asked me to go to his house. I left the Manor before Mr. Gascoigne reached it. Before I left, however, Elton brought me the little desk and the purse containing the key. I recognised it at once, it had been a birthday present from Mrs. Brierly, and Robert had chosen it. It was a little oak desk bound with perforated steel.

“I did not open it until after the funeral,

and at the time when I supposed they would be reading Emily's will. The will of course was—I suppose wives' wills always are, poor souls!—dependent upon the approval of her lord and master. Emily had some beautiful jewels, and some money had come to her since her marriage, from an old aunt of her father's, and she was very anxious that her mother and sisters should benefit by them.

“After returning from the funeral then, I took the poor child's desk out and opened it. The first thing that caught my eye was a letter to myself. I did not pause to read it then; Robert's letter was enclosed within it. I put them both at once into my pocket. Then came diaries and packets of letters. ‘Better to burn all,’ thought I, and I had just burnt the diaries, when I was interrupted by a knock at the door, and my

‘Come in’ was followed by the entrance of Mr. Gascoigne!

“‘I must apologise for intruding upon Miss Smyth, but I have just learnt, to my very great astonishment, that my wife’s desk, containing her private papers, is in your hands!’

“‘By your wife’s wish, Mr. Gascoigne.’

“‘That may be, but still *I* think that it is my duty to look through them before allowing them to fall into the hand of a lady, who, if I am not mistaken, has not been on good terms with the family for some years past.’

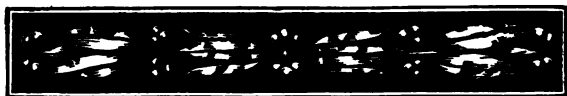
“I reflected a moment; as far as I knew the desk contained nothing now but letters of her mother’s and sisters’ and the few lady friends with whom she had corresponded.

“‘Certainly,’ said I, not noticing the latter part of his speech. “Will you glance over

them here, or prefer to take them away ? She expressed a wish that they should be burnt. I have already burnt some.'

“ ‘ So I see ; thank you for your permission, I will take the desk with me, it shall be returned,’ and he hastened out of the room, with poor Emily’s desk under his arm.”





CHAPTER III.

“EMILY, the beloved wife of Richard Gascoigne,” is buried, and her husband has given orders for a costly granite tomb and mural tablet. He did not reach Heatherby until she was dead. Her mother and sisters were in Italy, and, not being able to return in time to see her alive were not returning at all. Those friends and relations who had been invited to attend the funeral have left, and Mr. Gascoigne is sitting in his study. He only reached home three days ago, and decency forbade him attending to business before the funeral was over; but now he turns to the heap of letters and packages awaiting him.

There is one directed in Mr. Hurst's handwriting, sealed.

"Steward sending in his resignation, I fancy," mutters the Squire. "He has been very off-handed in his manners lately," and he tears it open. Out of it there falls a little letter, and he starts to see Emily's writing.

There are surely few things more painful than seeing once more, and unexpectedly, the familiar writing of a hand that will never write again. Imagine yourself receiving a letter, with a foreign post-mark, from your soldier son, a letter full of hope and bright anticipations of a speedy meeting. Alas! a telegram informed you of his death two days ago. What a melancholy treasure are the letters of the dead!

Mr. Gascoigne let the letter fall from his

hand as though it was a piece of fire. He wondered what was in the letter—farewell simply, or rebuke? Had she found out about —. He sat staring at the writing as it lay before him, tracing with his eye each stroke and curve that the trembling fingers had made. Then calling himself a cowardly fool, seized it and tore it open.

It was a very little letter—

“When you read this I shall be dead, and we shall be husband and wife no longer. I am not writing now to accuse you. I am dying at last, and I should like to say ‘I forgive you’ before I die. May God forgive you and have mercy upon you. May God forgive you as fully as I forgive you.

“EMILY GASCOIGNE.”

That was all, and there was no enclosure,

no postscript. He breathed a sigh of relief, and then wondered why Emily should have written at all unless she had written more. Well ! he was glad that was all, and he tore up the poor little letter and threw it on a heap of fragments that were accumulating on the hearth. The fire was out, but he would set the heap alight presently. He had many things to burn. He intended leaving Heatherby the next day, and would not return for months, perhaps years ; he hated the place, and had hired apartments in Paris in anticipation of his wife's death. What might not happen before he saw Heatherby again ? He might never see it again. He detested the work that was before him that night, but it was better that he should do it himself than that he should die, and strangers pry into his affairs. To-morrow he intended to make a fresh will ;

if he died intestate the estate would go to that sister of his to whom he now allowed a guinea a week. She had made a runaway match, and he had disowned her; but he intended to marry again and have an heir. The will was never likely to come into force, but he would make it nevertheless. Margery's children should never have Heatherby—never! And she would lose the guinea a week when he died! She had written only two days ago, saying she was in bad health, and begging him to increase the allowance, as she was too feeble to work; her husband was dead, and she took in dressmaking.

“Not I,” said Gascoigne, glancing the letter over again. “One son training to be a national schoolmaster! What a credit to the family. Eldest daughter out as nursery governess; two little ones at home. No! no!”

and the letter was thrown alongside that of his wife.

Now for that walnut wood desk that was in the iron safe. Why should it be in the safe? Certainly not for any protection from fire, for he hoped, if there was a fire, that desk should be first to burn. Cursing his folly for having ever preserved those papers and other things which it contained, he moved aside the parcels of parchment, etc., that lay on the top of it and took the desk out. Where was the key? He tried one after another, but none fitted, and then, losing patience, forced the lock with his pen-knife, and broke the box open. A number of yellow papers fell out. What confusion there was! What was he to look at first? or why should he not burn all unread, unlooked at?

But some feeling impelled him to single out

one packet from among the mass. It was tied with faded ribbon. He could not remember now what it contained, but he knew it had once been very precious. He cut the faded ribbon and the paper gave way, and a tress of black hair uncoiled itself and fell across his hand. Had it been an adder he could not have let it fall more shudderingly, and yet it was the hair of the only woman he had ever loved! When he shook it off his hand it fell upon his knee, and he started up with an oath, and, seizing the paper that had held it, brushed it off on to the floor, and thrust it aside with his foot; but some hairs still clung to his knees. It was not the first time a tress of black hair had rested on his knee, not the first time it had been thrust aside, and in his ears rang a moaning cry, "Pity! Pity!"

Twenty years before! Yes, he had loved Lucette better than all other women put together. Loved her for a time at least; and how patient she had been! Always glad to see him, never reproached him except that once, and had she not had her revenge? Yes! They were quits, and she was dead, and he had bought all her private papers from her greedy old mother. But how that cry rang in his ears, "Have pity! Have pity!"

As he lay back in his chair, he fancied that clasped hands were again raised up to him in entreaty—little white hands! Had he really struck her? He wished he had not done so, but how her pleading, her useless pleading, had enraged him. But he would forget her, he would never think of her again, and filling up his glass with brandy, he took a deep draught, and began to sort the desk. It contained

packets of letters—letters from father and mother when he was a boy—letters from his wife, and at the bottom was the parcel he had bought for that £1,000. He would not open that; he knew well enough what it contained. Had he not himself taken it from Lucette's desk and sealed it in her mother's presence? Should he burn it? Afterwards, when he had finished sorting the other papers; in the meanwhile, and he smiled grimly, "it shall go there," and he thrust it into his poor wife's little oak desk, the one which he had just carried away from Cousin Bessie, and then resumed his sorting. A miniature and one or two other things were put into the little desk; the rest were thrown into the hearth. What a strange mixture that heap contained! Letters of passionate entreaty from betrayed mistresses, side by side with the sad, spirit-

less letters of a betrayed wife. And that lock of hair ! Was that to be burned ? He looked at it where it lay, thrust rudely by his foot among the crumpled papers and ashes on the hearthstone. How dull and dead-looking it was ; how different to what it had been when on the living head ! Could he ever bring himself to touch it ? He took the lamp off the table and set it on the floor beside the heap around which that tress of hair seemed to twine. He did not wish to keep that hair ; yet he was loth to burn it. What tales could a curl from a dead woman's head tell ? He would keep a fragment and burn the rest. Holding the hair in some paper, so that it should not touch his hand, he cut off a fragile morsel and put it into his wife's desk and turned the key. Then, lighting a taper from the lamp, he set the

pile on fire. The old papers quickly blazed up, and the black tress writhed and heaved like a living thing in torture.

Mr. Gascoigne knelt before the fire guarding it, and now and then heaping fresh paper on. He felt very uneasy and nervous. Why had he chosen the night time to do this? Like most cowards he was very superstitious, and as the flame roared up the chimney he thought he heard some one calling his name, and then again came that wailing cry in his ear, "Pity! Pity!" He felt as though some one was watching him, and did not dare to glance behind.

Presently the noise of the burning subsided, and there was little left but tinder, from which a thick smoke rose, and now and then a blue flame broke out fitfully. He could not tell whether the hair was still there,

or whether it was burnt. An ivory ruler was lying close to his hand. He took it up, thinking he would stir the ashes and find out if the hair were indeed destroyed. He leaned forward, but the smoke stupified him, and a great feeling of repugnance came over him. That charred, smoking mass was hateful to him.

He started up and threw himself into his chair, and strove to nerve himself with brandy. He dared not leave the room for fear the flames might break out again and some mischief be done. He leaned back in his chair, staring at the smouldering papers.

Strange and horrible fancies pursued him; eyes stared at him out of the darkness, voices called his name. The lamp had burned down; with a trembling hand he turned the wick—turned it the wrong way—and was in

darkness ! No, not darkness, for the papers still burned, and now and then tongues of flame shot up and illumined the room suddenly, then suddenly died down.

“Some one is in the room playing a trick upon me—I know it,” he screamed. “Answer—speak to me. Do you think I cannot hear the rustle of your dress ? Lucette’s dress rustled that way ; but she is dead—dead. There ! now I see you—I see you. Who is it ? Answer, I say !”

As he sat rigidly in the chair, his eyes dilated, staring fascinated at the horrible burning mass, he saw a white hand reach out of the darkness and touch the heap. At that touch it crumbled and fell aside, and Gascoigne saw on the blackened hearthstone a wedding ring. The hand had come suddenly forth and gleamed in the darkness as

though phosphorescent. There it remained, motionless, pointing to that wedding ring.

“It is Lucette! Lucette, come to torment me! Fiend!—the ring was in that parcel; it must have slipped out,” screamed the wretched man.

Hardly had he said her name when, as passing through a veil, Lucette stood before him.

He, old and grey and worn, saw again the love of his youth. But she was not alone! Mother and daughter were together now—together they stood before him, majestic in their ministry of vengeance, looking down upon him, staring at him with the terrible glance of the dead.

* * * * *

Cousin Bessie, you will remember, told us

in the last extract from her journal about Mr. Gascoigne fetching away his wife's desk. She was staying at the steward's house. To continue—

“ I had crossed the little entrance hall that night,” she wrote, “ on my way upstairs to bed, when a loud knocking came at the front door. Mr. Hurst ran from the dining-room and asked, ‘ Who is there and what is the matter ? ’

“ ‘ Squire’s in a fit,’ was the answer shouted from the outside.

“ ‘ Anyone gone for the doctor ? ’

“ ‘ Yes ; Dutton’s gone. And there’s Mrs. Elton awful bad, too.’

“ ‘ I will come at once.’

“ ‘ Should I be of any use ? ’ I asked.

“ ‘ I have no doubt you would. Elton was the only person in the house with a head on

her shoulders, and if she is ill there will be confusion !’

“ And he hurriedly buttoned his top coat as he spoke.

“ ‘ I will come with the boy.’ And I hastened to fetch my bonnet and shawl.

“ I was soon ready. When we reached the house the lad signed to me to follow him, and he led the way down a dimly-lighted passage, and then, softly opening a door, I found myself in the study. I never dreamt of his taking me *there*. I thought he knew I was going to Elton, and I drew back, feeling sick and horrified ; but he had crept away up to the group at the far end of the room. The door was shut, and I did not dare to go alone about the ghastly passages that night. I stood still where I was and looked towards that group by the fireplace. The butler,

white as a sheet, was supporting Mr. Gascoigne (his face, I am thankful to say, I could not see; but I could hear him moan). Another servant was waiting with the basin and towels, and Mr. Hurst was evidently preparing to bleed the sick man. Behind them were one or two other servants whispering together.

“‘Put the lamp on the floor, Thomas,’ said Mr. Hurst. ‘Now hold your master’s arm so—quite steady, mind.’

“The vivid lamp-light fell upon the floor, upon the long, thin, naked arm, the glittering lancet, the trembling hands of the servants, and beyond the group it distinctly lighted up the hearth, which seemed filled with ashes. How long it was before the doctor came!

“I knew I ought to have been with Elton. She was bad with bronchitis, the boy had

said ; but I really dared not go alone, neither did I dare to speak to anyone in that group that surrounded the sick man. At length a ring at the bell announced the arrival of the doctor.

“ ‘Yes,’ said he, ‘you have done all that is right ; but that room is too close. He must be presently carried to his own chamber.’

“Mr. Hurst sent a servant to me to ask me to give directions about its being prepared.

“When I returned from doing so, I found the servants carrying Mr. Gascoigne out.

“ ‘Wait here,’ whispered Mr. Hurst, as he passed. ‘I will return to you presently ; see that no one touches anything.’

“One by one, with stealthy steps, the servants passed out with their master, and I was left alone in the disordered room. Now

that Mr. Gascoigne was gone, I felt nervous no longer, and looked round, breathing freely.

“The writing-table was a mass of confusion ; but I recognised Emily’s little desk upon it. It was closed. Beside it stood a large desk, open and almost empty. All over the table were heaped ledgers, packets tied with red tape, papers and letters innumerable ; and he had evidently been destroying some, for there was a smell of burning. Besides, the hearth was heaped with tinder. I went towards it. The whole of the space within the fender was filled with burnt paper. What a quantity he must have destroyed ! The smoke, even now, broke out occasionally, and the oppression from that, and the strong smell of brandy also that was in the room made me feel so faint that I ventured to open the window slightly.

“Just as I had done that Mr. Hurst returned.

“‘Anyone been in?’ he asked.

“‘No one.’

“‘Well, I must try to get the things put away, or perhaps’—and he hesitated—‘I had better merely lock the room up as it is. The doctor speaks very doubtfully, indeed. The heart has been wrong for years.’

“‘Is he remaining with him?’

“‘Oh, yes; and will do so until there is some change.’

“‘Would it not at least be as well to see that the fire on the hearth is quite out? I think it is still smouldering.’

“He went towards it, and then, taking the lamp from the table, seemed to be gazing earnestly at something.

“My curiosity was aroused, and I went

and stood beside him. In the centre of the hearth the heaped-up tinder had fallen in, or, perhaps, been brushed aside, and I could see upon the hearthstone what looked like a ring. He moved the lamp a little, and the thing glittered. Putting the lamp into my hand, he stooped and picked up—a wedding ring!

“‘Surely not poor Emily’s?’ said I.

“‘That it certainly is not, for I saw her laid in the coffin, and it was there I know afterwards. I saw the coffin screwed down, as you know.’

“‘Then what can it mean?’

“‘I have no idea; but we had better examine the rest of the heap.’

“I held the lamp, and Mr. Hurst, picking up a ruler that lay near at hand, turned over the ashes. But there was nothing except what appeared to have been paper, with one

exception, a morsel of scorched, half-burnt hair. It lay close to where we had found the ring. Mr. Hurst picked up the hair and wrapped it and the ring together in paper and put them in the large old desk.

“ ‘You had better take your desk with you,’ said he.

“ ‘The key is not in it, perhaps you may find it when you clear the table, it may have dropped out. I don’t fancy it has been touched—I am sure I hope not.’

“ ‘Most probably it has not. He seems to have been too much occupied with his own possessions. That big desk contained, I know, his private papers, and it is nearly empty now.’ Mr. Hurst shut the desk as he spoke, and then closing and fastening the windows, we both left the room, locking the door after us.

“Before day-break Mr. Gascoigne died. He had made no will, and the estate went to a widow sister of his, who, it turned out, was in very poor circumstances. Mr. Hurst never found the key of the little desk, but it is of no consequence, I should never dream of using it. When anything happens to me it is to go to my dear Robert Brierly. The key, I expect, fell out that dreadful night, and, being a fancifully-shaped gilt one, tempted some of the loungers who had crowded into the room.”

* * * * *

Note by Mr. Hurst.—“Miss Smyth did, however, open the desk in my presence within a month of Mr. Gascoigne’s death. To her astonishment it was found to be in a state of great confusion. He had evidently opened it

and thrust in some of his own papers. Collecting them together, I carried them away to be examined by the parties appointed to administer his estate. They related, we found, to a mock marriage that had taken place many years previously, between Mr. Gascoigne and Blanchit the celebrated singer. There was a sham certificate of marriage between Richard Hetherby, and Marie Lucette Blanchet, performed by one Saul Jones, an English minister. Among the letters was one from Blanchit, to Mr. Gascoigne, saying she had tracked him and discovered his real name, and where he lived. The letter began with bitter reproaches and then, changing her tone, the writer prayed him to atone for his perfidy to the mother, by showing pity to the child."

END OF PART III.



PART IV.

CHAPTER I.

ALAN had, at one time of his life, been given to the manufacture of light literature. Of late he had taken up what he called Essay writing, and was, at the time when we last met him in these pages, a regular contributor to that well-known Cambridge magazine, "Ultramarine." In style he was a kind of Ruskin-and-water, and was more popular with the lady readers than with the sterner sex, who were apt to denominate him shallow and sentimental. He had just reprinted some

essays in a fancifully bound volume. Like many men with half-developed poetic instincts, and what we might call a rather weak spiritual constitution, he often got out of his depth, and, quite unconsciously, said things that were really very wicked, only his lady readers were not wise enough to find them out. Now the last essay in the volume was not one that had appeared in the "Ultramarine," indeed, he had written it on purpose for the book. It bore the title of "From Life to Life," and was a misty amalgamation of "Paradise and the Peri," "The Dream of S. Gerontius," and "Queen Mab." It was, in fact, an imaginary description of the transit of a soul after death. The lady readers thought it "charming, inspired," and made a note of it for Sunday reading, but a waspish male critic smelt it out, pounced

down upon it, and shattered the poor little fable to atoms, showed up all its weak points, turned it inside-out. It was "absurd," "illogical," "wanting in the first principles of metaphysics." Alan felt as if he had been whipped. And, as if this were not enough, a religious magazine took the matter up, and in a slow, ponderous, and orthodox style, smashed him with the theological hammer. Poor Alan! he had really not meant to be wicked, and was quite horrified at the things that were imputed to him alike by the religious and the scientific, and, not being very strong-minded, he, for a time, collapsed as far as literature was concerned. It crossed his mind once that he would publish a reply, but he had not the gift of sarcasm, and, besides, he had no principles to defend in the matter. That essay was really only a little fancy

sketch jerked off in a fertile moment, and with certainly no object whatever in view, so far as "the insidious promulgation of heresy was concerned" (to quote the "Religious Reviewer").

The "Ultramarine" rejoiced in the possession of four editors. One was a clever drudge, whom nobody knew, who did all the work, the others were three learned men whom everybody knew, who did nothing, but allowed their names to appear on the title page. Robert Brierly, who had given up his curacy and taken a poor London living, was now known as a popular mission preacher, and had been persuaded to stand sponsor to the "Ultramarine" as regarded the theological element. Professor Smudge did duty for the scientific, and the Honourable Charles La Carte (who would insist on contributing

regularly himself, to the great annoyance of the business editor) recommended the magazine in the circles of the upper ten.

The three "somebodies" were expected in all things to obey the business editor, little Smithers. So when the London world began to make that unlucky essay notorious, Smithers put himself into a 'bus and went down into the East to see the religious editor, and dictated the letter which he was to address to the author. It was extremely courteous, but "begged to point out to Mr. Wybergh that on the title page of his volume he had stated that the essays were reprinted from the 'Ultramarine,' whereas *the* essay about which so many remarks had lately been made in the literary world had never appeared there, and *could* never have appeared there." Mr. Brierly also stated that in the next

“Ultramarine” there would be a notice to that effect.

“To *what* effect?” growled Alan; “that ‘From Life to Life’ never appeared in the ‘Ultramarine,’ or, that if I had sent it, it would have been declined? If that is the notice they are going to print I will never write a line for them again.”

Being in London at the time, instead of replying, he decided to go and see the religious editor, that well-known ritualist, Robert Brierly. So he walked off to Ludgate Hill and obtained the address from the publishers.

S. Lucien’s Parsonage was one of the blackest of black places. It had been built by some lunatic architect in the Early English style, and had narrow latticed windows, as though, in a dark London street you did not

want as much light as you could get. The door was opened by a respectable, elderly woman, who said that master was at church, but would be back in twenty minutes. Would the gentleman come in and wait?"

"Mr. Brierly is at church, is he? Which is the way to the church?"

"Straight on at your right hand, not far."

Alan then remembered that he had passed S. Lucien's in coming, and, as he had passed it, he had remarked contemptuously that it was a cheap, upstart, red-brick affair. He thought he would take the opportunity now offered him of seeing the inside of the church, no doubt there would be something to sneer at there. S. Lucien's was certainly a cheap church; it had been run up hastily in place of a small over-crowded iron one. But although it was brick, and cheap, there was

something impressive about it, and also *home-like*. Above the pointed roof of the chancel a massive cross was reared, and, let in over the west porch, by which the congregation entered, was the text, carved plainly in stone, "Come unto Me and I will give you rest." Above the text, in a niche, was an exquisite statue of our Lord standing with hands extended ready to welcome and bless. The door opened noiselessly, and Alan, creeping shyly in, sank into the nearest vacant seat, and, according to custom, buried his face for a brief moment in his pocket-handkerchief. Then he looked about him. His first feeling was that of utter bewilderment. He found himself in a lofty building, at the furthest end of which, was what he rightly deemed a vision of beauty. Gold, alabaster, flowers, gems, lights, on a background of soft,

rich, tapestried curtains. The choir, who knelt in a semi-circle before the altar, were chanting a litany, the alternate verses of which were taken by the tall priest, who knelt in their midst. Presently he rose, and, turning to the people, gave the blessing. What a beautiful face, thought Alan as he gazed at the pale, ascetic features; is that, *can* that be the editor? As the choir and worshippers passed out Alan remained feasting his eyes on the beauty of the sanctuary. He was as one entranced. Then, last of all, he rose and went lingeringly out into the filthy street. What a contrast there was between the calm beauty of the church and the noise and dirt of that outer world! Alan looked back with regret as he ascended the dingy steps of S. Lucien's Parsonage.

“Mr. Brierly will be in immediately, sir,”

said the servant, and showed Alan into a little book-room, where, in a few moments, he was joined by the same clergyman he had seen in the church.

Alan had forgotten to give the servant a card, and Mr. Brierly came in, suave and smiling, ignorant of his visitor's errand.

"I—I believe I have the pleasure of speaking to the Editor of the 'Ultra-marine?'"

Robert Brierly's countenance fell.

"I suppose so," said he, resignedly, taking a chair, and thinking, "Someone, no doubt, with a contribution."

Alan took out his pocket-book and drew from it Robert's letter.

"This is, I think, in your handwriting?"

Robert became somewhat confused.

"That is undoubtedly my writing," said

he. "Might I ask—have I the honour of addressing Mr. Wybergh?"

"Yes; I am Alan Wybergh. The 'A. W.' of the essays," said Alan, rather grandly.

And then he proceeded to enter upon the grievance which had occasioned his visit.

Robert was rather taken aback, to say the truth. Smithers had come down in a great fuss, having first been to Professor Smudge's, and not been able to find him, and Robert had written that letter hastily, and from Smithers' dictation, taking it for granted that it was all right. It was an understood thing that Smithers always was all right.

"You see," said Robert, "it would never do for it to be supposed that that essay was reprinted from the 'Ultramarine.'"

"But you don't mean to make a state-

ment in your magazine that if it had been sent it would have been declined?"

"Oh dear, no!" cried Robert. "That would be quite uncalled for. We will avoid all mention of your volume, and not admit any review."

"Then I really don't see—pardon my saying so—the object of your letter. You wished to repudiate that poor essay, I suppose. It is odd," and Alan drew himself up proudly, "that this trifle, which did not take an hour to write, should have caused so much annoyance. Really, if you have ten minutes to spare, I should like to go over it with you. There is no doubt about your orthodoxy, I suppose?"

Robert laughed, and said he had better not consult the *Rock* on the subject. There was something about Alan which took his fancy,

and they were soon busy discussing the vexed question.

In Robert's judgment, and he was both fair and wise, it was but a petty trifle, which had better never have been printed ; "but it certainly," said he, "did not deserve the hard names which had been bestowed upon it."

"And now," said he, shutting the book with a bang, "we have done with the subject. You are not the first person Pegasus has run away with. Now I have something to ask *you*. You remember that essay of yours on 'Church Music' ? It was capital ! Now, music is my great difficulty. I know what is bad, and I know what is good ; but, never having studied the science, the organist gets the better of me. Would you mind looking at this ? Can you wait ?" And, as

Robert spoke, he dived into a portfolio and produced from it several dirty music scores. They professed to be certain chants founded on Gregorians, and harmonised and adapted by Simpson, the organist of S. Lucien's.

Robert Brierly was perfectly certain there was something wrong about them, but could not tell what, and Simpson refused to be persuaded—Simpson, who considered himself to have original genius, and was the terror of the vicar's life.

"I am quite at his mercy," said Robert Brierly, pathetically.

Perhaps Alan understood music better than he understood anything else, and Gregorian tones in any form were an abomination to him. At the first glance, these "adaptations" of Simpson's were no worse than Gregorian adaptations usually are.

“Oh dear!” sighed Robert, much crest-fallen, “they do sound so bad.”

“All Gregorians sound bad. They are not music, and don’t profess to be music; but just allow me to look at the tone—if you have it by you—upon which this is founded. ‘Sancta Cecilia!’ he is good enough to christen this ‘adaptation.’”

“Here,” and Robert opened a chant-book at the “Tones,” pure and simple.

To Robert’s great delight, Alan upon comparing the “Sancta Cecilia” with the tone upon which it was said to be founded, discovered that it was entirely wanting in the characteristics of the original chant; it was, in fact, a new thing, and to Simpson must in future be accorded the honour of having added another dismal band of notes to the ancient few.

“I was certain something was wrong,” cried Robert, delighted. “Now I will send for Simpson; he shall have a dressing—he richly deserves it.”

But at that moment a bell rang, and Robert, turning to Alan, begged him, if he could possibly spare the time, to stay and have tea with them, and go with him to the practice.

Then he looked blank, and remembered that his visitor had, most probably, not yet dined; and before Alan could prevent him he rushed off to improvise something, and sent a small boy to invite Mr. Simpson to tea to meet a friend of the vicar's.

What a merry tea-table that was! Behind the teapot sat a bright tiny old lady, with silvery hair, who answered to the name of Cousin Bessie, and there were a couple of

talkative schoolboys, pupils of Robert's, and the victim, Simpson, who submitted to the fire of badinage and criticism with that calm self-possession which is the usual result of perfect self-conceit.

Alan had had but small experience, in late years, of what is known as home-life. A wild time which followed upon his breaking off from Lily had separated him from many of his old friends, and Aunt Emmie and her innocent lambs had fought very shy of him. In fact, virtue, led by Aunt Charlotte, had assumed such a sour-visaged aspect that he had been thrown more completely than need have been upon his wild companions.

Ah! if but some pure, good woman had come boldly forward then to give him a helping hand, what a blessing it would have been to him! but that honour was reserved for

Evangeline. She made the happiness of his present life, and, while with her, existence was an Idyl, a perfect poem set to perfect music. And in the future? Alas! that word always disturbed his reverie.

He roused himself, and joined in the conversation.

How genial and light-hearted Robert Brierly seemed, not, perhaps, highly intellectual, reflected Alan, from the lofty heights of his own intelligence; but still quick-witted enough to pass, and most companionable and sympathetic. And that dear little old lady with the crisp, silvery curls. She was, he thought, a fairy-godmother kind of woman. How she petted that great big Robert, and how tender he was to her. Even the supercilious Simpson gave him amusement instead of disgust.

"Time for practice!" said Simpson, as seven o'clock struck. "As you are engaged with Mr. Wybergh, it will be a pity to trouble you to attend to-night, sir."

"Thank you," said Robert, calmly, "but I believe Mr. Wybergh himself is coming. Did you not say you would be able to come?" and he looked piteously at Alan.

Alan glanced at Simpson who was dallying nonchalantly with his teaspoon.

"If Mr. Wybergh could spare the time," said Mr. Simpson sarcastically, "I am sure we should derive great benefit from his supervision. His experience as an organist must, no doubt, be enormous."

"Mr. Wybergh has studied the *science* of music," said Robert hastily, and then he launched into a rapid account of some mission services that were to be held shortly at S.

Lucien's, and gave a brief summary of certain hymns and metrical litanies that were to be got ready for it. Four services daily there were to be, and all musical; and talking eagerly over his various plans, they adjourned to the church where the choir was waiting for them. The practice was very tedious. The choir did their parts well enough, but Simpson was equally obstinate and inefficient, and Alan wondered that Mr. Brierly's patience was not exhausted. At last it was all over, and the priest and his visitor were left together in the church. Alan had never touched a church organ since those Heatherby days. This organ of S. Lucien's was a particularly fine instrument. Alan, as he stood before it, looked up half-reverently at the magnificent row of pipes. His fingers instinctively sought the keys, and rested lov-

ingly upon them. He was in a reverie again. Robert, thinking he wished to play, offered to blow for him, and immediately went and did so, and Alan, still in his reverie, played. His heart was full of those past days, and once more he played, "O, rest in the Lord, wait patiently for Him, and He shall give thee the victory!" And as he played with half-closed eyes, he fancied that *she* was standing by and singing softly. He forgot everything except those first few weeks of innocent happiness.

"He that shall endure unto the end shall be saved." Into this he poured the full passion of his soul. "Endure!" did he not endure? "To the *end*!" when his little child should lead him to the land where the mother was at rest. Sighing itself into infinity, the music died away, and Alan rose, pale and exhausted.

Robert, who had been listening entranced, came forward to express his delight, but stopped suddenly, saying—

“Why, my dear sir, are you ill?”

“A little faint, that is all. Let us go into the air.”

“Wait in the porch a moment while I get you some water from the vestry.”

When Robert returned he found him leaning against the church wall, and the excessive sadness of his expression wakened all Robert’s sympathies.

“You are sure you are better?”

“Quite sure. Mr. Brierly, I want to ask you a favour. Let me come and help in the music at that mission you spoke of.”

Seldom had Robert heard any more welcome words. He had been looking forward to the musical arrangements with something

akin to dread. The mission preacher, Dr. Goldie, was, he knew, one of those highly sensitive musicians who would be thrown all out and irritated to a frenzy by discordant singing, as he now told Alan, but, he said frankly, and laughing as he spoke—

“When you say ‘help’ how much do you mean ?”

“I’ll take all the music if you like,” said Alan carelessly. “Give Simpson a holiday.”

“My dear sir, it would kill you—besides, Simpson would not go. But I’ll tell you what we might do. He has already told me that he will not be able to take all the services. Could you take the mid-day and five o’clock? And you must be my guest for the week. Dear Cousin Bessie will take excellent care of you.”

“I shall be very glad,” said Alan, and then

added, "your world is a new one to me. I think I should like to learn more of it. When may I come?"

"The mission begins on Saturday week."

"And you are practising every evening. At the same hour?"

"No. To-morrow we have half-past seven service and practice afterwards."

"Well, if possible, I will come down to-morrow night," and with a very warm pressure of the hands the friends of a few hours' standing parted.





CHAPTER II.

It was the evening of the commencement of the mission. Alan's arrival had been delayed by one or two matters, and he did not reach S. Lucien's until nine o'clock. The front door was open, and various carpet bags and portmanteaus were lying about, for the house was to be full of visitors. The drawing-room door was open, and a cheerful firelight gleam came out into the passage. Alan entered quietly, but half drew back, for standing by the fire, with her back to him, was what he at first took for a Sister of Mercy. She was dressed in a long, plain robe of dark grey, but she had forgotten her

cap, thought Alan, for the drooping head, with its magnificent coils of black hair, was unscreened. The noise Alan made in entering the room roused her, and the tall, graceful figure turned slowly towards him. There was only the bright firelight in the room when their eyes met, and Alan saw nothing but her eyes. They were dark, grey, melancholy eyes, almost black.

“Miss Smyth will be here directly,” said the lady, speaking in a low, musical voice. “Won’t you sit down?” And as he seated himself, she resumed her former position. She gazed into the fire as though absorbed in thought, and Alan, from his chair, observed her without her appearing conscious of his scrutiny. She was a tall, handsome girl, with a somewhat Jewish cast of features, and a sweet musical mouth. Her figure was

a queenly one. One of the beautiful, well-moulded, white hands hung down, the other clasped the silver and ebony cross upon her breast. Was she a "Sister," mused Alan; but, did Sisters of Mercy usually wear their hair like that, coils upon coils of rich plaits ending, at last, in that queenly coronet?

Some one opened the front door, and the lady's cheek flushed quickly, and the hand that played with the cross trembled. In another moment Robert entered.

"Why, Esther!" said he, not noticing Alan, "how do you do, my dear. Where is Cousin Bessie?"

Esther gave him her hand in silence, and then glanced at the corner where Alan was sitting.

"Ah! my faithful Precentor! Have you been introduced?"

Esther shook her head and smiled graciously.

At Robert's entrance the statue seemed to have warmed into life.

"This, then," said Robert, "is my far away Cousin Esther. Mr. Wybergh, Miss Esther Brierly, Queen Esther!" and he bowed half-mockingly, then threw himself down on a sofa near Alan.

"Cousin Bessie went, I think, to look after supper," said Esther. "You are tired, Robert, may I get you some wine?"

"Engaged, no doubt," thought Alan, sarcastically, but he was mistaken. Robert had loved once for all when he loved poor Emily, and perhaps this grand, queenly creature, did not fulfil his ideas of what the loved one ought to be. People generally profess to worship majesty at a distance, or at rare

intervals only, preferring for fireside comfort those little, foolish, doll-like creatures, whom their magnificent sisters designate insignificant and childish.

But Queen Esther! Ah! poor Queen Esther, who, at twenty, had had lovers by dozens, thought that the world did not contain a treasure equal to this sainted, exalted being, her cousin three times removed, Robert Brierly. But, of course, that is a secret.

Again the door opened, and in came a slim, erect little woman, in black silk, and wearing a dainty "widow's cap." She had thin, small, peaked features, and ferretty blue eyes, which seemed to take in the room and its occupants at a single glance.

"My mother—Mr. Wybergh."

Mrs. Brierly was charmed to make Mr. Wybergh's acquaintance, and came smiling

towards him, and took the vacant seat at his side.

Few persons could be more fascinating than Mrs. Brierly when she chose. And she now exerted all her powers of pleasing. How gratefully she thanked Alan for helping dear Robert with the music. Yes! she had come for the mission—she would not miss it for worlds—she only hoped dear Robert would not be dead before the week was over, etc., etc., in gentle, purring tones.

Mrs. Brierly, by the way, had become a Ritualist; Ritualism was the fashion. And was it not her duty, “as a mother,” to dog Robert’s footsteps, and perpetually harass him with petty interference and advice upon subjects concerning which she was entirely ignorant.

What a satisfaction it was to her when

things went wrong, to be able to say, with a sigh, "My dear, I always told you so!"

Mrs. Brierly had arrived at a certain stage in Ritualism — that stage which divides coloured stoles from vestments, clerical direction from auricular confession—and having gone so far herself she was perpetually saying to her son, "thus far shalt *thou* go, but no further."

She embroidered numberless coloured stoles, and presented them as marks of approbation to certain pet curates, but nothing would induce her to enter a church where the other vestments were in use. She had several clerical directors in whom she confided, and whom, after the first charm of her fascination had worn off, she greatly bored. Only too soon did the sight of those tiny square envelopes, with their dainty

directions, become a horror, which was only equalled by the dread of her gentle tap at the vestry door. When admitted, she would sit a weary time purring piously, with down-cast eyes, and if *sin* was brought at all on the *tapis*, it was the sin by which others trespassed against her. She would also sometimes entreat to have her mind set at rest upon some matter of doctrine, and then, having got the subject up to the best of her ability beforehand, she would glide into an argument with her "director," and go glibly over her little stock of settled opinions, and prolong the saintly *tête-à-tête*. A widow's veil has sometimes to cover a multitude of sins. Thus Mrs. Brierly; and nothing could equal the pious clap-trap with which she occasionally indulged her friends concerning the "Sacrament of Penance." *That*, as she

very justly remarked, was an entirely different thing to what took place at her interviews with clergymen in the vestry. "No one," quoth she, "should ever be *her* conscience keeper!"

Certainly Robert was to be pitied. I doubt if any man is more to be pitied than one who is tied to a woman with "settled opinions" which happen to be different to his own. Mark how the female creature is continually dragging her petty store to the front, and vaunting its merits, and challenging him publicly to an argument.

When one sees how constantly men are made to suffer at the hands of "clever women," it is little to be wondered at that the generality of wise men prefer fools—happy, domesticated, smiling women, no more burdened with "settled opinions" than are their own pet Angoras.

Robert, when attacked, always took refuge in a smiling, obstinate silence. He was very happy in his church and parish. The "work" was progressing wonderfully, and the people were much attached to him; but Mrs. Brierly had lately conceived the idea that dear Robert, with his wonderful gift of extempore preaching, was throwing himself away at S. Lucien's, and that he had much better marry Esther, live in her big house in Esmond Square, preaching occasionally at popular churches, contribute noticeable articles to High Church serials, until such time as her dear friend, the Member for Severston, could get him a more suitable living.

Before Alan and Mrs. Brierly had been acquainted ten minutes, Mrs. Brierly had confided to him her anxiety about Robert's

health, and her wishes that he were located in a different neighbourhood.

“He seems much attached to the place,” said Alan.

“He is so good ! He is always contented. Dear Robert ! But—” and, with admirable foresight, it occurred to Mrs. Brierly that some hint about Esther would not come amiss here. Robert might be teased into wishing to marry her eventually, and it would be highly annoying if this handsome young *protégé* of his should come between them in any way, and they would, she knew, be thrown constantly together for the ensuing week. “But,” continued Mrs. Brierly, sinking her voice, “Robert could never bring a *wife* here, Mr. Wybergh, it would be quite impossible ! especially one gently and luxuriously nurtured. Dear Cousin Bessie lives

here, it is true, but then she is so sentimentally attached to my son, she would follow him anywhere; besides, she was differently brought up to—but I must not mention names—indeed, *all* that I have said to you just now is quite in *confidence*—dear Robert cannot bear the least allusion—I feel sure you understand—”

Here entered Cousin Bessie, brisk and bright, announcing that supper was ready at last.

“Oh Robert! those girls! Little did I know what it would be when I consented to take them.”

“Yes,” sighed Mrs. Brierly, “I always knew it would not answer.”

“Oh, it answers well enough generally,” said Cousin Bessie, a little sharply, “only Hannah is ill to-day, and I have to superin-

tend everything. Please, Mr. Wybergh, bring Mrs. Brierly in to supper ; come, Esther, my dear. Mr. Brierly's fancy is this," continued she, as they seated themselves at the table, "and a very good and kind one it is, and I am sure while he is so patient about mistakes, *I* must not complain. He keeps one clever middle-aged servant and two young girls under her. These girls he chooses himself out of the parish, and selects them *solely* because they are steady (and between ourselves, Mr. Wybergh, steadiness and stupidity often go together). As soon as they know anything I have to get them situations, and he searches for more raw material. It is a little trying sometimes," and she spoke in a low tone, "Mrs. Brierly *will* make remarks if things are not all right."

The supper had certainly not been cooked by the solemn red-haired girl, who plunged to and fro on her mission as waitress, and who became at length frightfully nervous under the scrutinising gaze of Mrs. Brierly.

Alan wondered what would have become of them had it not been for Cousin Bessie, who seemed to have an eye for everybody's wants, and the direction of whose glance Harriet endeavoured to follow and act upon, until at last, in pity alike for her and themselves, Cousin Bessie bade her put everything on the table and go.

"You will never make anything of that creature," said Mrs. Brierly emphatically, almost before the girl had closed the door, to which Cousin Bessie replied, calmly—

"Ellen was ten times worse when she first

came, and now she is third housemaid at Lady Sutherland's, and has £12 wages."

Mrs. Brierly shrugged her shoulders and made some ill-natured rejoinder about Lady Sutherland's domestic *miss-management*, which Cousin Bessie allowed to pass unchallenged. Mrs. Brierly rarely spoke except to ask some questions of Robert about parochial matters, and here, of course, Mrs. Brierly must edge in her advice. After supper Robert retreated to his study, declining the offer of Mrs. Brierly's society, and the lady visitors, remembering they would have to rise early in the morning, retired.

As they mounted the stairs Mrs. Brierly turned an arm affectionately round Esther's waist, which Esther, with an air of proud indifference, neither accepted nor declined.

"I cannot go to bed until those girls have

done their work," said Cousin Bessie, "and that will not be for an hour yet; but if you would like to come with me into the drawing-room and read or write, and if you like a cigar there, I don't, in the least, mind," continued that exemplary woman, as she took up her knitting and sat down in the little basket chair which was held sacred to the use of Cousin Bessie.

Alan had a bump of reverence, and would have scorned himself had he dared to smoke in that pretty little room, which shone out like a lily in the midst of the surrounding dirt and discomfort as fair and trim as Cousin Bessie herself; but he was glad to sit and do nothing, and contemplate his pretty hostess. Women of sixty *can* be, and sometimes are pretty, or ought I to say beautiful? And Cousin Bessie, with her silky, silver-bright

locks, and sweet expression was equal to the best. "Cousin Sunshine," as Robert sometimes called her. Alan and she, as was natural, began talking about the mission. They had met daily for the last week, and had become fast friends. From the mission the conversation passed on to Esther Brierly.

"Have you never met before?" asked Alan.

"Well, she rarely visits—she is very shy and reserved except to the few she loves. She is not really related to Robert. Her father was the half-cousin of Robert's father, but they always call each other cousin."

"I think I understood Mrs. Brierly to say that they were engaged?"

Cousin Bessie smiled.

"Mrs. Brierly—well, the wish was father to the thought. No! they are not engaged,

and not likely to be. Robert does not intend to marry. I dare say, indeed, I know, that Mrs. Brierly would like him to marry Esther. She is rich and he is poor ; but I know it will never be !” Cousin Bessie shook her head, pursed up her lips and looked solemn for a moment or two, and then proceeded. “ Esther’s father was the junior partner in the jeweller’s firm of Josephs and Co. Everyone knows Josephs and Co. ; they are now bankers, and have been so for several years ; but five-and-twenty years ago they were jewellers, and it was then that Thomas Brierly joined them. He was an Evangelical Churchman, but he had no objection to fraternise with the Josephs, who were nominally Jews—only nominally—for with them everything was made to give way to worldly advancement ; and so, when a great

lady took a fancy to old Josephs' motherless daughter, Miriam, and converted her, he made no objection. What did he care about Miriam going to a Christian church so long as she went in a countess's carriage? And then the Countess, who was a great woman for church restoration, got the firm several orders for church plate, which the Jewish firm executed to perfection. The Countess had many interviews with Mr. Brierly while the work was in progress. He was in heart a Calvinist, but he kept this to himself, and entered into all her ladyship's views and projects that she imparted to him about her churches. She was charmed with him. At last he made her a *confidante*. He was attached to Miriam Josephs. And so the good woman turned match-maker, and never rested until she had got them married, pre-

senting the bride on her wedding-day with a magnificent tiara of diamonds bought at Josephs', Josephs' and Brierly's.

"I was at the wedding. I am connected with the Brierlys through the Lumleys. The Brierlys are, between ourselves, nobodies. The Lumleys—" and the little lady drew herself up—"the Lumleys are, as you are aware, connected with the—" and Miss Smyth gave Alan a perplexing sketch of her pedigree, and that of the different branches of the Lumley family, and then returned to Thomas Brierly's wedding breakfast.

"Of course, you see, he hunted up all his most respectable relations, and his cousin having married a Lumley, he claimed kindred with the whole of the Lumleys, and the Lumleys, being poor, did not object to be present at the ceremony, especially as the

Countess was to be there. I never liked Thomas Brierly, and I liked him less than ever that day. How well I remember him ! He was perpetually bowing to the Countess, and 'my ladying' her—which, of course, no one does except servants. And the poor, dear Countess ! She had made such a talk in her world of having converted the beautiful Jewess and getting her married to a Christian ! But I think she had misgivings. Ah ! the beautiful, stately bride, how well I remember her, too, just like the dear Esther of to-day ; with the same melancholy eyes. They went for a week to Paris, where he had business on hand, and then he brought her 'home' to the gloomy house in Esmond Square. A year later Esther was born, and the mother died. Thomas Brierly was not the husband for her ; he was cold, jealous and exacting, while she,

with all her reserve, had deep, warm feelings. I fancy he expected that she was at heart like her father—scheming, worldly and money loving. I fear her married life was a very unhappy one, but it soon came to an end, and she died and left her little child in that gloomy house. The father never troubled himself about her. He never married again. After his wife's death he gave himself over to his first love—*money*. As soon as it was possible he sent Esther away to school, and when she was seventeen he died, and she became an heiress, and returned to possess the gloomy splendours of Esmond Square. His will was a characteristic one. As long as she remained single she was to enjoy the whole of his fortune, some £1,500 a year; but, should she marry, she was only to keep £500 a year and the house. Perhaps he

meant it as a safeguard against fortune hunters. There the poor child has lived for the past three years with a cranky, snarling old woman, a relation of her mother's, a Jewess blood and bones, and who, ignoring the fact that she is almost entirely dependent upon Esther, sneers and criticises and grudges every penny that is spent. I don't know what would become of Esther if it were not for S. Margaret's. She is an associate of the sisterhood, and spends half her time there, and, of course, she comes here often. Robert understands her character thoroughly, and makes allowances for her. You see she is, as he says, a person of poetic temperament—sensitive and emotional, and people of that kind require allowances made for them. I sometimes think she has just enough genius to make her long for more, but

not enough to satisfy her. Of course she is not a person to make confidences. She is excessively reserved, and lives in herself too much. I think she talks to Robert, perhaps, more than anyone else. And then, you see, she has her Jewish instincts. Robert says he has often noticed in people of Jewish descent a yearning after something unknown—what he calls a ‘longing after Jerusalem’—and even when they have become Christians the habit still remains. It is an inheritance, and that word reminds me of another trait in Esther’s character—her love for jewels. Not as a means of feminine adornment, for she is wonderfully free from feminine vanities; but simply a love for them as being perfectly beautiful. Some of her best have gone to S. Margaret’s—but I hear those girls locking up, at last, thank Goodness! And as I have

to be up at seven to get poor Robert his breakfast ready the moment he returns from the early service, I had better go to bed. I am so glad Dr. Goldie is not staying with us. Poor dear man, he is such a fidget ! He would not give Robert a moment's peace ; and so good-night, Mr. Wybergh. I don't suppose we shall see much of each other this week, for you and Robert will be tearing about the parish like mad when you are not in church, and I shall have to devote myself to the care of your bodies. Dear me ! during that last mission I had to be perpetually lying in wait for Robert and the mission priest with mutton chops and glasses of wine. They would not have lived through the week if it had not been for me ; but, Mr. Wybergh, there is one favour I should like to ask from you."

Alan bowed.

“You know,” continued Cousin Bessie, “you and I are quite confidential friends now, are we not? Well! Mrs. Brierly is a very charming woman—at least, I often hear people say so. Would you mind devoting your spare time this week to her society? I really—. In fact she is a *worry*, Mr. Wybergh, and that is the long and short of it, though I don’t like to say it of dear Robert’s mother, but she does plague him sadly. I can see, though, of course, he never says a word or shows the least annoyance. She will be all that is charming with you.”

Alan laughed, and promised to do what he could, and they parted.





CHAPTER III.

It was the third day of the mission, and Dr. Goldie, a tall, ascetic-looking man, was preaching to an overflowing congregation. On the front bench, full in the blaze of the altar lights, sat Esther ; and Alan, from his seat at the organ, could see her, himself unseen. Several of the S. Margaret's sisterhood had come to help at S. Lucien's that week, and so Esther had donned her associate's dress with its demure bonnet and flowing veil. During the service Alan, looking up from his notes to the little mirror on the organ, caught frequent glimpses of Esther. He had seldom met with a person who interested him so much as she did. He could scarcely

remove his eyes from her as she sat there, her head bent, and her hands clasped upon her knee. The beautiful face was more beautiful than ever in its quiet dress. I am afraid Alan did not listen to the sermon. He leaned back in an unclerkly fashion (organists I have always noticed are habitually irreverent ; "familiarity breeds contempt," I fear, with them), and, sheltered by the carving of the rood screen, gazed fixedly at Esther. Esther's was always a melancholy face, and Alan speculated as to what the cause of her sorrow might be. Did her gloomy early days still overshadow her, or were there other reasons ? Cousin Bessie had told Alan of the numberless lovers who had come but to be sent away ; it was impossible, thought he, for one with Esther's beauty to love and be unloved. Sometimes—not often—she raised

her eyes to the preacher, and Alan looked full into the beautiful sad face; then, the sermon ended, they rose to sing. The hymn was one of those old favourites that will always hold their own against the multitude of smart, new-fangled things. Alan and Lily had sung it together at the old church at Brixton, and all through the first verses he heard the echo of her soft, sweet tones chiming in with his own—married music as he called it. But with the last verse a voice broke in that dispelled his dream and drowned the peace-giving memory of Lily's voice—it was a sad wail that pierced to him above all other voices—

Oh, my sweet home, Jerusalem,
Would God I were in Thee!
Would God my woes were at an end—

Alan glanced round. Yes; it was Esther's

voice. She was standing there, her tall black robed figure conspicuous among the gaily dressed women with whom she sat. Her eyes were fixed upon the altar, and there was an expression of agony upon her white face that startled him by its intensity. When the hymn ceased she sank on her knees and buried her face in her hands. The congregation departed, some to their homes, some to the customary prayer meeting, and still Esther lingered on her knees. Alan, as he was putting by the music, preparatory to going away, saw Robert come hastily from the vestry, and with a troubled anxious expression, go towards Esther. She heard his footstep and rose, and Alan noticed the imploring gesture of her hands when she saw who was approaching her, and the look half reproachful, half piteous.

"I am afraid you are ill, Esther," said Robert, gently taking her hand, but she hastily drew it out of his grasp, and lowering her veil, replied in a tone—the cold composure of which astonished Alan—that she was perfectly well, the sermon and the music had excited her a little, that was all.

"Are you quite sure, my dear?" asked he kindly, in that very brotherly and unsentimental tone in which he always spoke to her.

"Quite sure, thank you."

"You do look so ill! Don't think of going to the meeting, go home and lie down, I must hurry away, but Mr. Wybergh will take care of you."

"Thank you," replied Esther coldly, "I prefer being alone," and with a slow firm step, she passed down the aisle and out of the church.

“Well, then I had better go. Are you coming, Wybergh?”

Alan hastily locked the organ and they walked off together.

“Really!” said Robert, after a meditative silence, “what strange beings women are! Now I have offended Miss Brierly to-night. I can tell it by her manner, but I don’t in the least know how.”

* * * * *

When Alan returned to the house after the meeting was over, he surprised Esther as she was pacing to and fro in the firelit drawing-room. She looked up at him as he entered, and, summoning her self-control, seated herself quietly and asked some questions about the prayer meeting.

“Would Robert be kept late?”

“Most probably. There were about a hundred people wishing to see him and the missionary.”

“How weary he will be,” said Esther. “I don’t think these sermons suit me. You don’t know how exhausted I feel to-night. I don’t think I shall remain after to-morrow,” and she leaned back languidly in her chair.

“I am very sorry to hear it,” said Alan, and he meant what he said.

Ever since Lily’s death he had considered himself as a broken-hearted widower. Thenceforth, he had said to himself, women would be to him only as mothers, sisters, and daughters, other relationship was impossible to him ; but he owned that he had for Esther the most “sisterly” regard he had perhaps felt for any woman.

“You live in Esmond Square, I think?” asked Alan.

“Yes. Number 3. The large house with the iron shutters. If I do go to-morrow, as I now intend, would you come and see me after the mission is over and tell me all about it?”

There was no coquetting in Esther's manner, nothing to hint to Alan that she wished to continue and improve his acquaintance ; she spoke in a weary indifferent tone, and an idea flashed upon him that he had guessed Queen Esther's secret—she was in love with Robert Brierly, and wished to hear of him from Alan.

“I will make a point of calling upon you as soon as I leave—that is if you will not reconsider your verdict and remain with us. I am sure we shall all regret your absence.”

“Thank you. No! I must go. Ah, there they are.”

As she said this Robert Brierly and his mother entered. Mrs. Brierly would always insist on remaining to walk home with dear Robert. He was gifted with saintly patience in no common measure, but even that was scarcely able to stand the petty fault-finding and prying questions that were showered upon him in his homeward walks.

Robert threw himself wearily into a chair in silence. He did not notice Esther, but surely he would remember to ask how she was? But, no! other things had happened since they parted, which had put her entirely out of his heart.

“All went off very well to-night,” said Alan in concert-parlance, thinking of the singing.

“I suppose so,” said Robert, leaning back with closed eyes. “I was dead tired and could wait no longer. Goldie said he could do without me—I should like something to eat!”

“I will ask Cousin Bessie if supper is ready,” said Esther, coming forward from her dark corner. Perhaps Robert did not hear, at any rate as Esther passed him he neither moved nor spoke. It was not until supper was half over that he remembered what had happened in the church, and turning round to Esther, who had been placed beside him, asked her kindly if she felt better.

Then, of course, ensued a deluge of enquiries from Mrs. Brierly and Cousin Bessie, interspersed with unpleasant comments from the former upon Robert’s conduct in not having mentioned it sooner, in having allowed Esther to walk home alone, in not

having called for Mrs. Brierly and Mrs. Brierly's vinaigrette; to all of which Robert replied calmly that Esther was a sensible young woman and did not like a fuss.

In the first moment of silence Esther stated her wish to return to Esmond Square the next day. Mrs. Brierly was grieved and aghast, and little Cousin Bessie looked melancholy, and owned that things would have been more comfortable if she had been less occupied with those servants.

"There, Robert! you hear? I don't really wonder at dear Esther not wishing to remain," broke in Mrs. Brierly.

"Oh, no! it is not that," cried Esther, "don't think that for a moment. It is the excitement of the mission that does not suit me, that is all."

Mrs. Brierly remonstrated, and suggested

that Esther need not attend so many services, but Robert looking up from his bread and cheese, said in his usual brotherly tone—

“Let Esther please herself. I won’t have her teased,” and wheeling round to the fire he took up a newspaper.





CHAPTER IV.

IN the Abbey gardens at Severston is a broad walk shaded by trees, and bordered on one side by the stone wall that shuts in the playground of the boys' part of a charity school. Backwards and forwards along the paths Esther was pacing one May morning, about a month after the mission. She had left S. Lucien's, as she said she would, and gone back bravely to the dreary loneliness of Esmond Square. She knew perfectly well that Robert did not love her, except after that brotherly fashion which, in its mockery of her own feelings, was almost worse than nothing at all. And so she made up her

mind to go away and see S. Lucien's no more, for some time at least, and when she went, she thanked Heaven fervently for her power of self-control which had let her hide her secret in her own heart. In truth, no one but Alan guessed it, and Alan was always on the alert for any discovery of this nature.

Mrs. Brierly, far from imagining the true state of things, had been frequently annoyed by Esther's coldness to Robert, and when she proffered an invitation to Esther to accompany her to Severston, it was with the intention of getting Robert also down for a "week's rest after the mission," and throwing the two young people perpetually together. Esther, wiser than she, accepted the invitation, knowing that, in the work which had arisen incidental to the mission, Robert could not possibly leave home for some time to come. It would be

an unspeakable relief to be in a place where she knew he could not come. In London, strive as she might with herself, she never went out without a yearning hope that they might meet; never stood at a window without longing to see him pass by—and in her pride how utterly she despised herself! Others, good men and worthy in every way, had laid themselves at her feet, and she had been perfectly indifferent to them; nay, had wondered that they should have presumed to love one who cared nothing for them.

Esther, in her majestic beauty, a beauty which she half disdained, received the homage, which was offered to her by the eye of every man she met, with no more emotion than she felt the breath of the wind or the rays of the sun. She simply accepted it unquestioningly and as a matter of course; yet still, in those

rare instances where it was withheld, she missed it, and perhaps her love for Robert had arisen at the first instance out of pique that he should be indifferent about what all the world (*her* world) esteemed so highly. What was her beauty worth if it could not buy his love? And she despised herself and it. In that great house of hers a sickening longing after peace and green fields had come upon her, and when Mrs. Brierly had sent her the invitation, Esther gladly consented to accept it. Mrs. Brierly's house was very near the gardens in which stood the ruined abbey, and although Esther had vowed to forget Robert if possible, she bought a sketch-book and spent many of her mornings with it in the gardens, and drew *con amore*—she wished to fill that one book with Severston views. There was one sketch in particular she

wished to elaborate and finish off as perfectly as possible. It was one, the beauties of which Robert had often enlarged upon to her; and if, thought Esther, he should ever ask her to tear it out of her book and give it to him, she would not mind doing so! It was this sketch she was studying on that particular May morning. Just without the Abbey garden, separated from it only by a light iron railing, stood the old manor house of Severston. It was grey, and gabled, and ivy-grown. Once it had been a grand house of entertainment, now it was a charity school. It stood in a grassy garden, with old trees dotted here and there, and fragments of ruins and winding paths, along which, in their play-hours, the school-children danced and sung. This was the sketch which Esther wished to devote herself, and in studying the pic-

turesque old house, she became interested in the children who, day after day, she saw trooping out into its garden when lessons were over.

Among the circle of Mrs. Brierly's acquaintance was a Lady ffarington, and, when one day, Esther mentioned the interest she felt in the children of the charity school, Mrs. Brierly said, "Lady ffarington will be sure to call upon me in a day or two, we will ask her if you might be allowed to see over it. Lady ffarington is general secretary to all the Church charities here."

Now this Lady ffarington was, without doubt, one of the most wonderful women in Severston. She was, if we may presume to go back many years in her history, the daughter of a poor, proud, Irish gentleman of good family, and much had Sarah O'Grady

been envied by all her lady friends when, forty years perhaps before the day on which Esther first entered Severston, she had captured that matrimonial prize, Lord ffarington's second son, the Honble. and Rev. Tom Duckseye. At that period of her life she had been black-eyed, impulsive, and skittish. But her ready wit soon showed her that impulsiveness must be suppressed, and skittishness totally annihilated, when she had allied herself to the noble house of ffarington. She was a clever woman, and made Tom Duckseye an excellent and affectionate wife. Everyone at Severston knows how she smiled him into a deanery, and wheedled him into a bishopric. Often had motherly and wifely bosoms been filled with wrath to see the success that attended the manœuvres of Sarah Duckseye, and many Christian men

had made bitter, unchristian speeches concerning that “dull, feeble-minded fellow, Duckseye, who was being hoisted over the heads of his betters, thanks to the tricks of his forward, intriguing wife;” and they thanked Heaven that the little they had received was due to their own merits, and not to the coaxing of a wife’s lips however pretty, or the fascination of a wife’s eyes, be they blue, grey or black. Yes! the injured ones agreed in solemn conclave that they would have despised themselves utterly had they permitted their wives ever to lower themselves to do as did the Honble. and Rev. Tom Duckseye’s. After which, separating, each cleric returned to his dove-cot, and snapped and snarled at the meek common place little saints, whose modest, retiring dispositions they had so lately been extolling.

The Honble. Tom might be dull and feeble-minded, but he was most heartily loved by his clever wife. She was one of those women, great both in mind and body, who are never thoroughly happy unless they have something weak to pet and protect. Poor Tom, with his delicate health, who wanted so much looking after and caring for, was just the husband she needed ; and he, good-natured, affectionate and lazy, was perfectly satisfied to have his business managed for him by his wife—so they were both suited. At last she reached, what she was pleased to admit was the height of her ambition—Lady ffarington became the wife of a bishop. It was not an important diocese certainly, that of Barkham, but “ no doubt, thought Sarah, he will be promoted before long ;” and scarcely were they settled in the Barkham Palace

when her eyes strayed fondly to Winchester, the bishop of which, it was reported, was in a most precarious state of health.

Before a year was over, Bishop ffarington was indeed promoted to a higher sphere—but it was not to Winchester, but Heaven! and, to say the truth, that was a little more than his wife had either asked or hoped for.

And so Lady ffarington came back to Severston. It was the place where her husband had had his first living, and had been the scene of his rapid promotion. They had made many friends there, and kept them, and rarely a year had passed since they left it for the Deanery without their making a round of visits in the neighbourhood. So Lady ffarington bought a house in Cathedral Place, and within three months of the

Bishop's death she was queening it upon all the religious committees in the city.

In few places have "devout women" of independent means a better field for the exercise of their energies than at Severston.

In the first place, it is a Cathedral City, so a certain amount of religion is as much "the thing" there, as is military taste "the thing" in a garrison town.

Secondly, there is—or, at any rate, was in Lady ffarington's time—nothing of those Popish abominations, "authorised sisterhoods," which systematise charity and leave but little work of importance for amateur outsiders to experiment upon.

Thirdly, there are a very large number of clergy and a lot of very little parishes, "which of course," say the good women,

“being so very small, ought to be so thoroughly looked after.”

And so the devout, wandering about at large and according to their own sweet wills, find a most delightful occupation in ferreting out cases of unpardonable neglect, and meeting occasionally at five o'clock teas to discuss the same, laud their pet clergy, and freely and bitterly and unchristianly condemn those wretched beings who unhappily fall short of the “devout woman’s” standard of clerical excellence.

I must, however, do Lady Ffarington the justice to say that she was one of the best of her class; at any rate—having, no doubt, frequent recollections of the shortcomings of poor Tom—she never spoke against the clergy, which is a great deal to be able to say of a “devout woman.”

She had attached herself to the parish of a certain Mr. Wand, who had once been her curate.

He was a mild, inoffensive little man, with an equally mild wife, and Lady ffarington, in her position of Squire of the parish and lady patroness, took care, to the best of her power, that he did his duty. I don't think she ever clearly realised that he was her curate no longer, and Mr. Wand was quite content. Did she not pay the choir expenses (and choose the hymns, etc.), and keep him in port wine, and his wife in baby clothes. Who would not gladly be patronised, with such results as these?

Now, I am not sneering at Lady ffarington—far from it! She is—or rather was, for she is dead now; (*R.I.P.*)—a woman for whom I always entertained the greatest respect.

I don't think that, perhaps, religion was at the bottom of her actions so much as was love of power. She was a woman born to rule, and able to do it wisely and kindly ; and it was only just that the object of her nature should fulfil itself. She never abused her power. She was one of Nature's own queens, whom meaner beings instinctively obeyed.

There is a history extant of a calm victory gained by her over the Committee, Trustees, and Lady Patronesses of an important Severston Charity. When Lady ffarington settled in Severston the Charity was managed by two committees—male and female. The members of the Ladies' Committee were perpetually quarrelling with each other, taking offence, retiring themselves, or requesting others to do so. In short, the

business of the Charity was generally overlooked and neglected, in order that time might be found at the meetings for certain members to make excited speeches full of personal allusions.

Just as they were at their worst, and in the very hottest of hot waters, Lady ffarington appeared upon the scene. She happened to arrive late (a very unusual thing for Lady ffarington), and the Ladies' Committee had had time to launch into its usual squabbles.

Miss Prince had risen to leave the room, declaring she would never enter it again until Mrs. Shafto had made an apology—an ample apology.

Mrs. Shafto declared that, if it was only to prevent the re-entrance of Miss Prince, apologise she would not!

Then in swept Lady ffarington, in rustling silk, bowing suavely.

Of course Miss Prince subsided into her chair, and Mrs. Shafto into silence, and the chairwoman (fat, good-humoured Mrs. Button, M.P.), who had in vain tried to "hush!" the combatants, waddled forth to give the new-comer welcome.

Mrs. Button had previously hinted to Lady ffarington the melancholy state of things usual at their meetings.

Lady ffarington apologised for coming so late, and then begged, in her pleasant, cordial way, that they would permit business to be deferred a few moments, so as to give her the opportunity for making the acquaintance of her sister committee-women; and smiling, "regardless of their doom," they gladly consented.

Two-thirds—perhaps all!—of the women at the table would have voted for or against anything on the face of the earth, so that they might have been able to claim a greeting from Lady ffarington in the Market Place.

Ever after that memorable day all things went smoothly with the Ladies' Committee. Lady ffarington invariably mastered the business matters beforehand, and settled what was to be done; and when anything was anticipated that would require to be voted upon, she begged the committee-women to take five o'clock tea with her the day before, and talk the matter quietly over. In other words, give her an opportunity of advising them how to vote!

And how could it be otherwise than that these charming little *réunions* of hers—lun-

cheons and early teas—should soften the hearts even of a Prince and of a Shafto. Mrs. Brierly had once suggested a wish to be on that memorable committee; but Lady ffarington replied frankly that she was not needed, and suggested that she should, instead, take up the *Crèche* and manage that, and Mrs. Brierly, powerless, like the rest, to withstand Lady ffarington, acquiesced, solacing herself with the thought that, although the *Crèche* was a comparatively insignificant institution, it was better to be first there than reduced to play second fiddle on a committee where Lady ffarington reigned supreme.

Now Lady ffarington and Mrs. Brierly did not love each other. What could Lady ffarington, wise and large-hearted, have in common with one whose mental horizon was so narrow and whose soul was so mean?

Lady ffarington never condescended to hate; if she had been in the habit of doing so she would have considered Mrs. Brierly to be too utterly beneath her even for that. To Lady ffarington Mrs. Brierly was simply insignificant, both in mind and body, and she would have been immeasurably astonished had she known the amount of thought that Mrs. Brierly expended upon her, and the covert sneers with which she generally accompanied the mention of her name.

Had not Mrs. Brierly been in Severston years before Lady ffarington took up her abode there as the Bishop's widow? Bishop indeed! And was not Mrs. Brierly the great granddaughter on the mother's side of an Earl? Was she not a Lumley? And who were the O'Grady's?

"No," repeated Mrs. Brierly constantly to

herself, "she is my inferior in everything except money, and it is owing to that that the vulgar, toadying Severston people bow down to her."

And she hated Lady ffarington with a spiteful, envious, unreasoning, bigoted hatred.

Yet still, being a Christian, she invariably wound up her soliloquy by thanking Heaven that she was above bearing malice, and forgave Sarah ffarington—vulgar, forward woman though she was—from the bottom of her heart.

Some people, when they take a dislike to any one, are glad to avoid the object, and not irritate themselves by needless collisions; but to Mrs. Brierly there was a kind of fascination in her hatred (it is an ugly word, but I fear a softer one would scarcely be suitable).

She was perpetually seeking Lady ffaring-

ton out, and when they were together the cold blue eyes allowed nothing to escape them.

She was dimly conscious that she was giving way to bad feelings, and was, therefore, extremely glad when anything occurred which seemed to justify her dislike. When possible, Mrs. Brierly liked to think she was doing even bad things on principle; and if it were her duty to represent Lady ffarington in a different light to that in which the generality of people regarded her—well! it was a painful duty; but it was a duty, and she must not shrink from it.

So when Esther, having been told that she must enquire from Lady ffarington about the Charity School, asked, "And who is Lady ffarington?" Mrs. Brierly shrugged her narrow shoulders, and settled herself more comfortably in her chair, as though preparing

herself for making an important communication.

“Lady ffarington, my love,” said she, “is a very remarkable woman. Many years ago she was at home in a tumble-down farmhouse not very far from Dublin. Her father was really only a second-rate farmer, though I have heard her say that there have been O’Gradys at Gradystown (as they call the place) for several hundred years. That may be! but I do know they were miserably poor, and that Sarah, their daughter, was only half educated; you will soon detect that, my dear. She was reported to be very fast, and given to questionable freaks with the officers. At one of the Dublin balls she met Lord ffarington’s two sons—Fred and Tom Duckseye. One was in the army; the other was thinking of being ordained. Having

made all sorts of enquiries about them and their prospects from their brother officers, she threw herself at the eldest one, but it was of no avail ! He was a clever young fellow, and saw through her, so she was obliged to content herself with the other, who, being only half bright, fell a rapid victim. Well ! they married, and he got ordained, and she took to flirting with those in authority to get him on in the world. He got a little living at Severston, and she somehow scraped acquaintance with the wife of Archdeacon of Bambrough who was visiting at Severston, and begged an invitation from her to visit her. She went, and the next thing that horrified everybody was a shocking, shocking story about her and the Bishop of Lindisfarne” *

* Which Bishop of Lindisfarne Mrs. Brierly refers to I have not the remotest idea. It was certainly not St. Cuthbert. Let us hope that the scandal to which she alludes may be utterly without foundation.

and Mrs. Brierly's face became unusually bright and animated. "Mrs. Duckseye got introduced at the Palace, and the way she fascinated the Bishop and induced him to conduct himself (and he was Evangelical too) was a subject for common remark. Had a poor curate behaved in such a way he would have been unfrocked! And it was the same thing with the Archdeacon, and he was more Evangelical than the Bishop; but the High Church party quite unintentionally put an end to that. At their suggestion, Mrs. Duckseye persuaded the Archdeacon to go with her for a moonlight walk. He got quite sentimental, poor dear soul, and talked poetry and all that sort of thing; and when it was time to go home she allowed him to persuade her to take another turn, and hinted in low tones that she had a favour to ask

from him. The favour, my dear, was that he would give up the black gown! but the Archdeacon, who was a very shrewd man, had wit to see that he was being made a fool of, and with great resolution broke off the acquaintance at once. Her friendship with the Bishop ended as every one expected it would—in the best living in the Diocese, and having got that, she never troubled about the Bishop any more.”

“I think,” said Esther, loftily, for she had a majestic disdain for petty scandal, “people ought to have forgotten all that now. It must have happened many years ago.”

“Not so many years ago, and people won’t forget,” snapped Mrs. Brierly.

After a moment’s thought, she continued—

“After all, the Bishop episode was not

nearly so bad as the Prime Minister one, when Lady ffarington, as she was then, had set her heart on a Bishopric. She and Lord—I forget his name; but I know he was a Low Churchman, too; it is really very odd!—were constantly together, and I am sure many people thought, and indeed declared—”

“I really do not care about things which happened so long ago,” interrupted Esther, “if you would tell me what she is now.”

“She is now just what she always was—a forward, flirting, scheming woman, who likes to twist everybody round her little finger; courts popularity under the semblance of religion, and—

“Lady ffarington!” announced the page; and Esther, looking up, beheld a tall, handsome, matronly woman, of an uncertain age,

with a frank, cordial expression of countenance.

Mrs. Brierly went to meet her with both hands extended.

“My dear Lady ffarington! How very kind of you to call so soon. Yes, this is my sweet Esther, of whom you have so very often heard.”

Esther and Lady ffarington shook hands, and looking into each other's eyes, knew instinctively that they would like one another.

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